Marco B. Bucci

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NOMEN OMEN™

Volume II ◆ Wicked Game

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In the time before time, when I was a college student, one of my concentrations was on folklore. Though it began as a passing interest and a reason to get credit for the concepts I was already studying anyway in anticipation of writing comics, through the classwork I gained a deep, unexpected appreciation for the way stories and culture intersect. NOMEN OMEN understands this unique crossroads, it always has. Here is a book about magic, about story, and about the power of words. And why wouldn't words sit at the center of power in such a book? After all, it's only since the printing press that words, spoken words, have slowly begun to lose their influence on story. Before that, words had the power. Stories were time-locked in the moment of their creation by the luxury of printing and absolutely precise reproduction. Stories were molded and empowered through the words of the speaker. This is how they stay current, this is how they gripped audiences, time and time again, because no telling was exactly the same. Even the same words, given a different inflection, would take on a different meaning, hold different corridors of someone's heart enraptured. This, by necessity, was also how stories changed. They were supposed to do so, evolving with the views and needs of the world around them. If these tales were monoliths, they were malleable ones. So here we are in 2020, readers of NOMEN OMEN, a book that understands the hunger for instant gratification, the demand of reliable emotional returns, and of a distanced yet curated existence which can in many ways seem the enemy of folklore, of raw, living, changing story. This is a book operating in an industry, and aware that the tropes of that industry too must change. Though there are familiar elements to NOMEN OMEN, it's the drive of this book to return to folklore, to present elements and events that readers may think they know in a new, updated, evolved way. In NOMEN OMEN, power is achieved not by doing things the same way as before, not by saying the same spells, performing the same rituals, retelling the same exact stories. Those rote methods are shackles.

In NOMEN OMEN, power is achieved by inventing your own path, doing things your own way, finding your own way into the winding flow of power known as magic, known as story. Its leads who achieve do so by abandoning the deeds of past generations, throwing out the rulebook, and treating magic and story as the things they're meant to be: concepts that change. So while once, a rhyming spell may have granted access to power, in the present, for a character raised in the technological age, the language holds no weight, that door to might is closed. Only by reworking the words, inventing a magical language that is devoid of stuffy tradition, but rich in personal, present, meaning, do the heroes of NOMEN OMEN take control of the power waiting for them. I think that's a beautiful message, and a beautiful thing. I think it's understandable to want to rely on the means that brought utility to past generations, the advice of those who achieved before us, but I think it's healthy, and I think it's more important than ever to accept that those means cannot be ours.

Whether its magic, or our own personal futures, what worked for those who came before is never guaranteed to work for us. More often than not in the present world moment, it's more likely not to. So why not give the finger to those ways? Why not throw out the rulebook, set our own goals, and accept that the means to those ends must be of our own invention. Why not think of our lives like folklore, our own personal story, and allow ourselves to find power in our ability to evolve and change. That is true magic, that is true power. NOMEN OMEN applies the rich principles that once brought stories to life around a campfire in the days of early man to modern, fantasy storytelling, and in doing so creates modern folklore.

You're welcome to look at it and say this isn't how stories about magic are told, this doesn't follow the rules, but the real gift is in accepting that when it comes to storytelling, there was never supposed to be a rulebook in the first place. Let your mind be malleable, let the words take you, and engage in the new face of folklore before it passes you by.

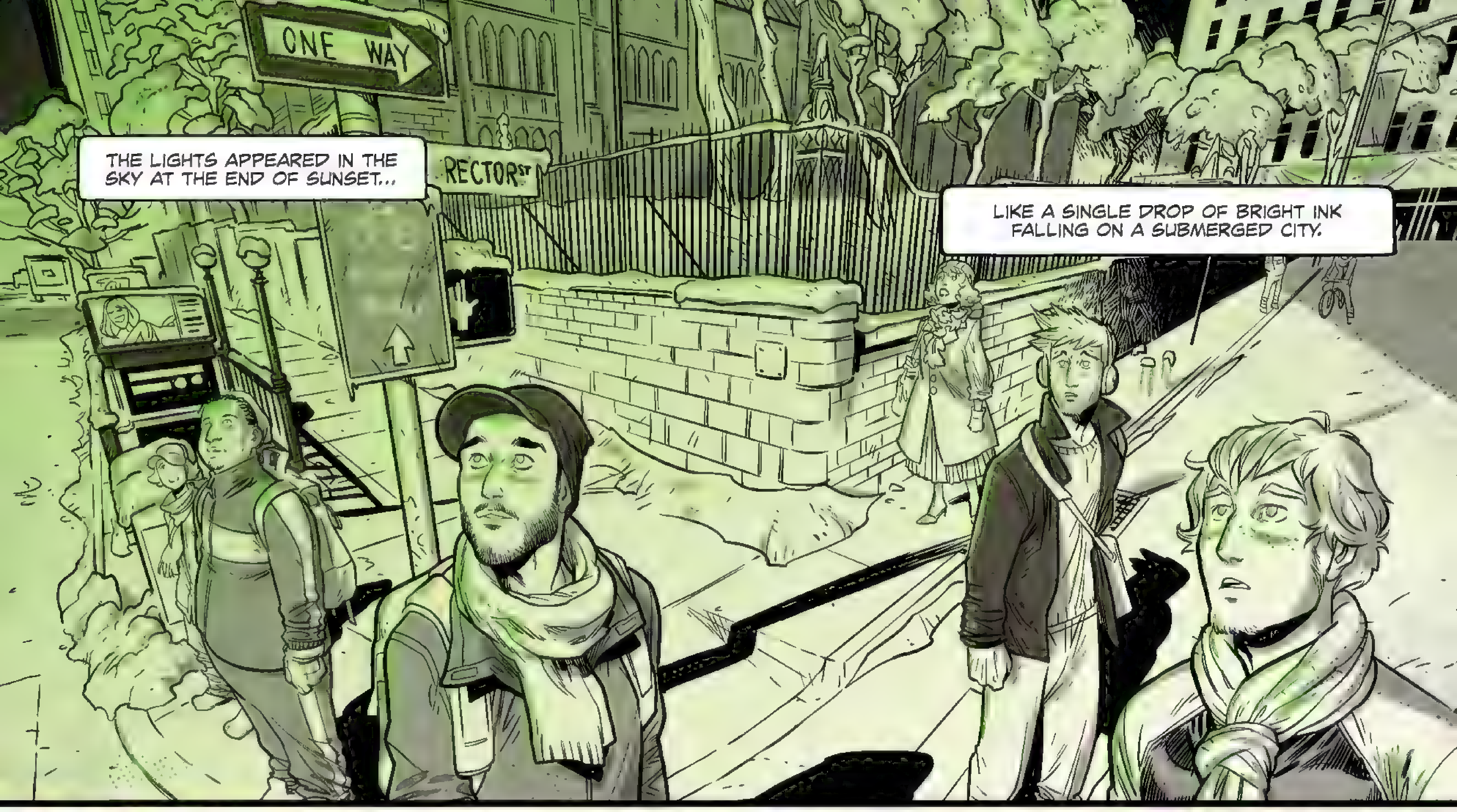
Steve Orlando
October 2020

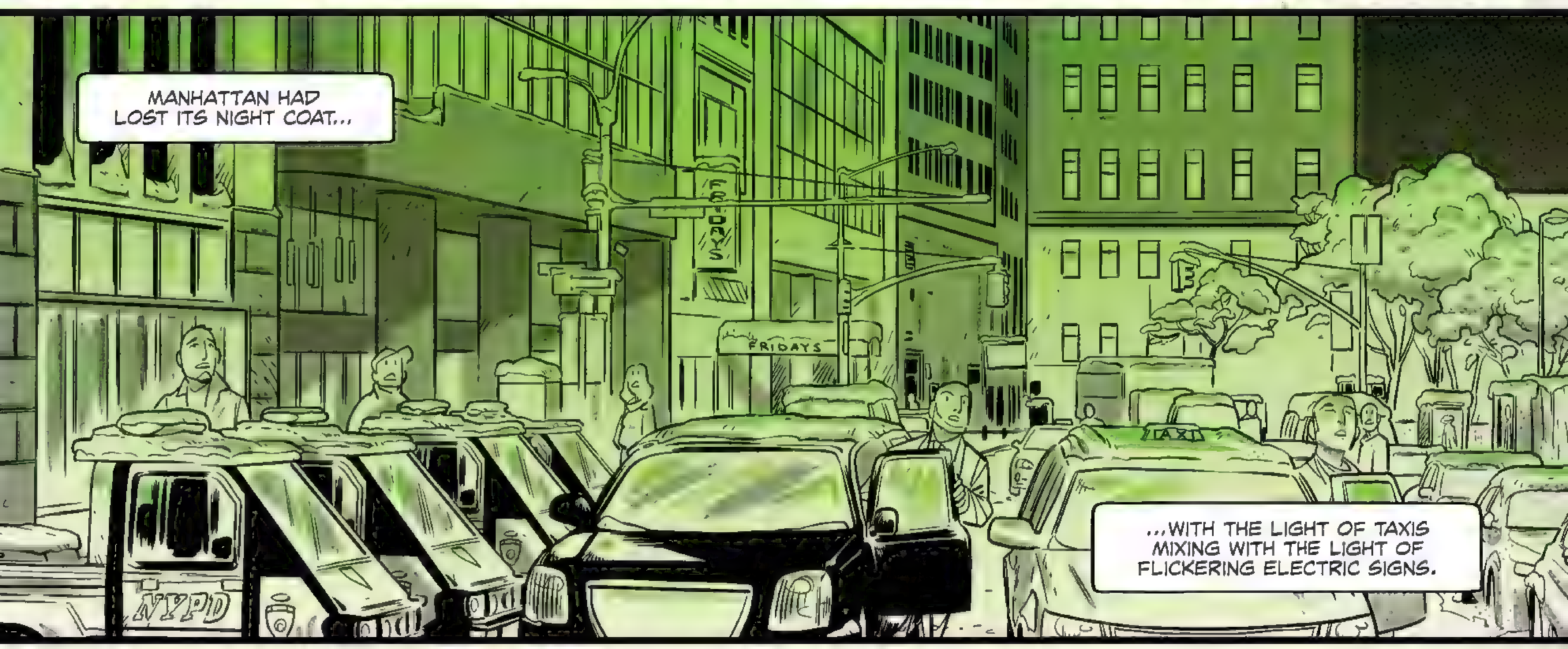
Tor Books Awards-winner and GLAAD Awards-nominee, Steve Orlando is one of the most appreciated comic book writers of his generation. His talent with dialogues and characters' development emerges both in his works for DC Comics (*Martian Manhunter, Midnighter, Wonder Woman*) and his creator-owned series like CRUDE, UNDERTOW and VIRGIL. His new original series COMMANDERS IN CRISIS is currently published by Image Comics.

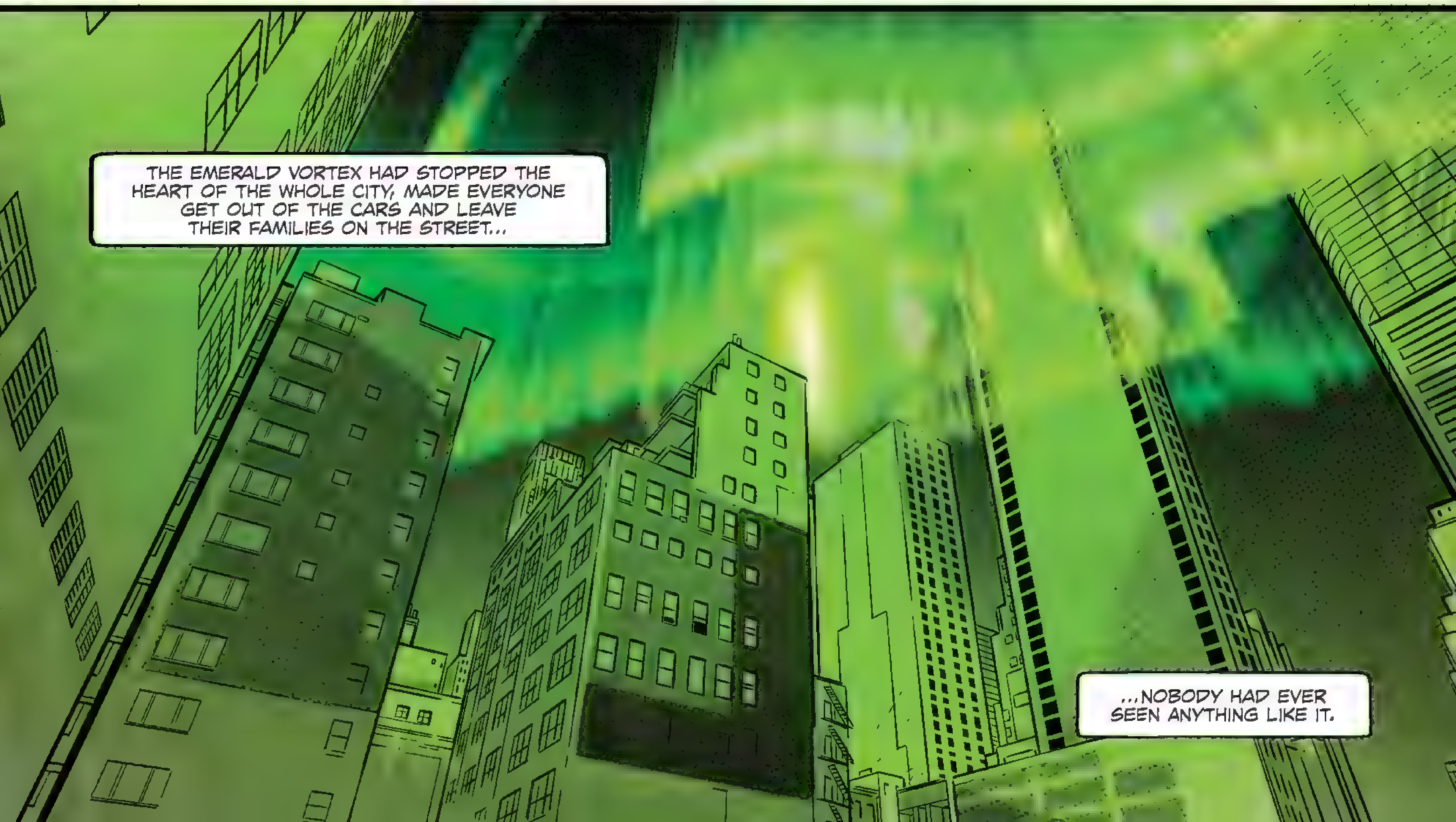
Chapter 6

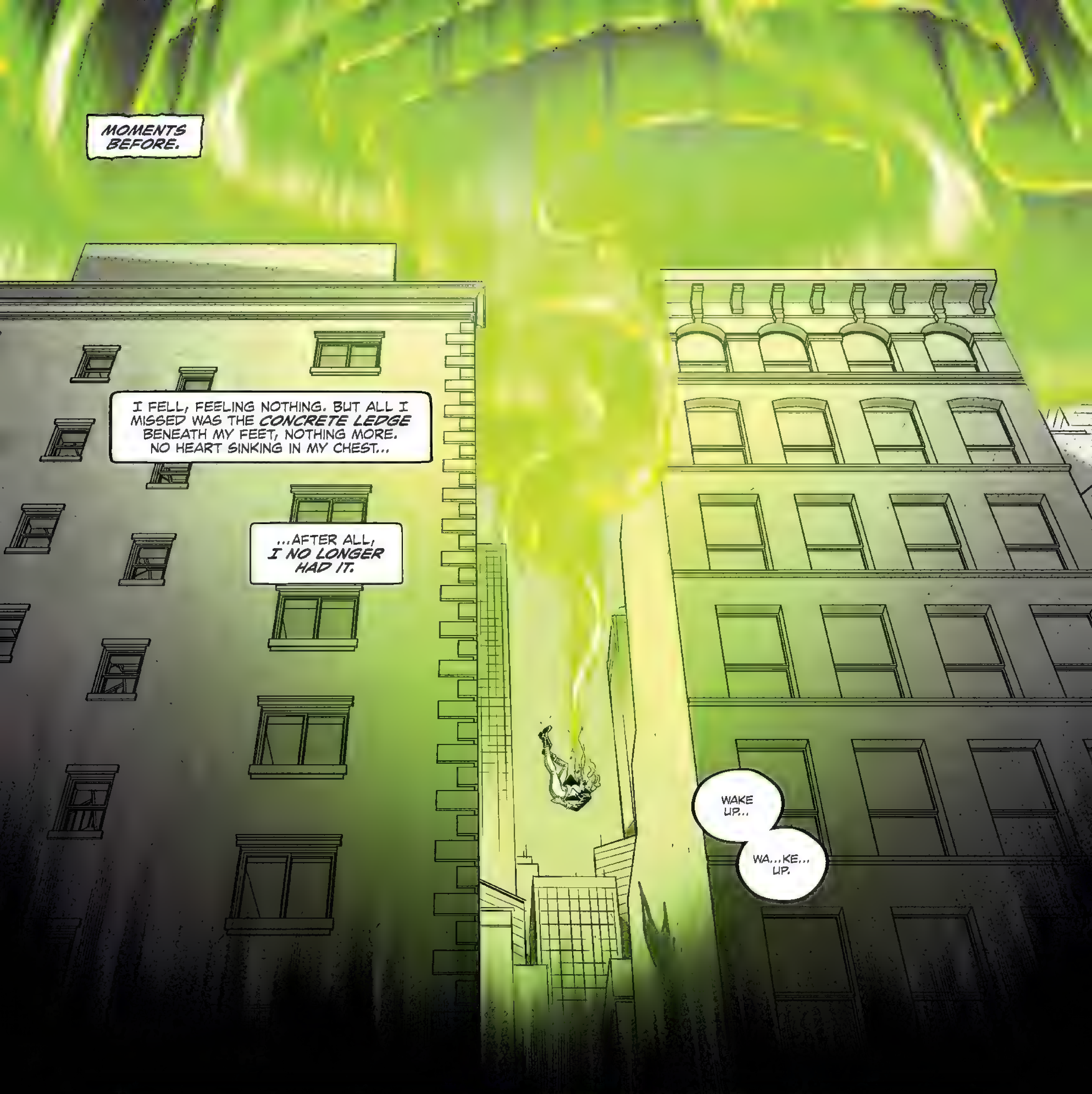
Let the throbbing
gleam be caught by the king,
shining in his palm like a ruby,
even if he steals it like a marauder,
and jealously hides it from the sight of his subjects.
Because it will sing promises in his dreams
of a sweet future and the return of his beloved land.
A single torment will appear before him, because the usurped
bearer, even if she is marked by a cruel fate, will not die.
Taken with deadly timing in her twenty-first year and on the twenty-first
day, she will also fall into a very deep sleep, without ever really resting.
She will walk in the waking world through the eyes of the dreamer.
Unfaithful visions will lead her to the renegade queen who
will caress her inflicted wound, where she once
lived has now become her captor.
But ancient magic will be worth nothing as long as the
new will not return a reforged glimmer.
Poor wretched daughter of Yule, lost is
the heart that was given to you. But it was so
afflicted to be a scourge. Come on, open your
chest and finally welcome the heart that
you yourself are creating.

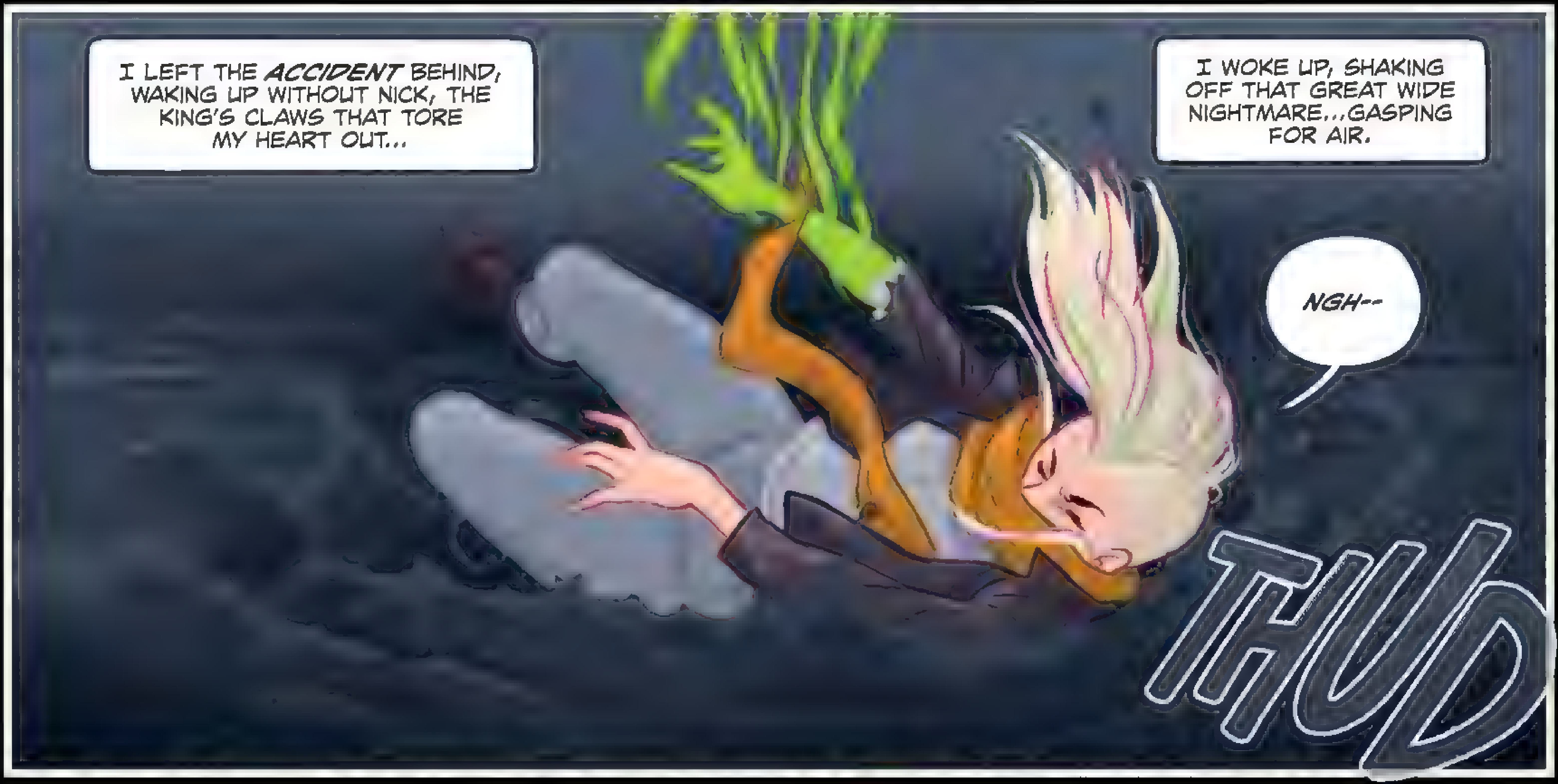
MANHATTAN.
TODAY.

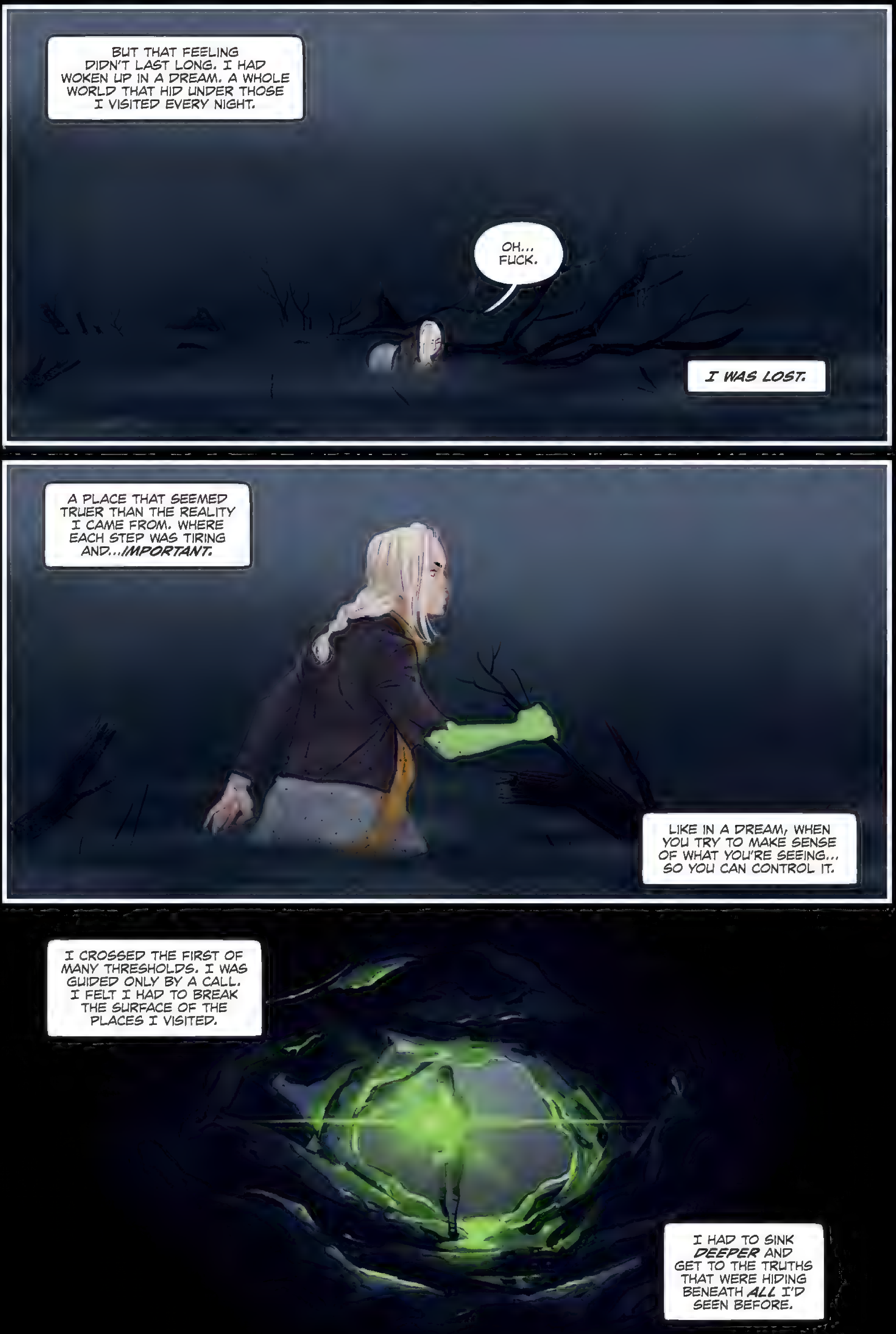

ONE WAY
RECTOR ST
THE LIGHTS APPEARED IN THE SKY AT THE END OF SUNSET...
LIKE A SINGLE DROP OF BRIGHT INK FALLING ON A SUBMERGED CITY.

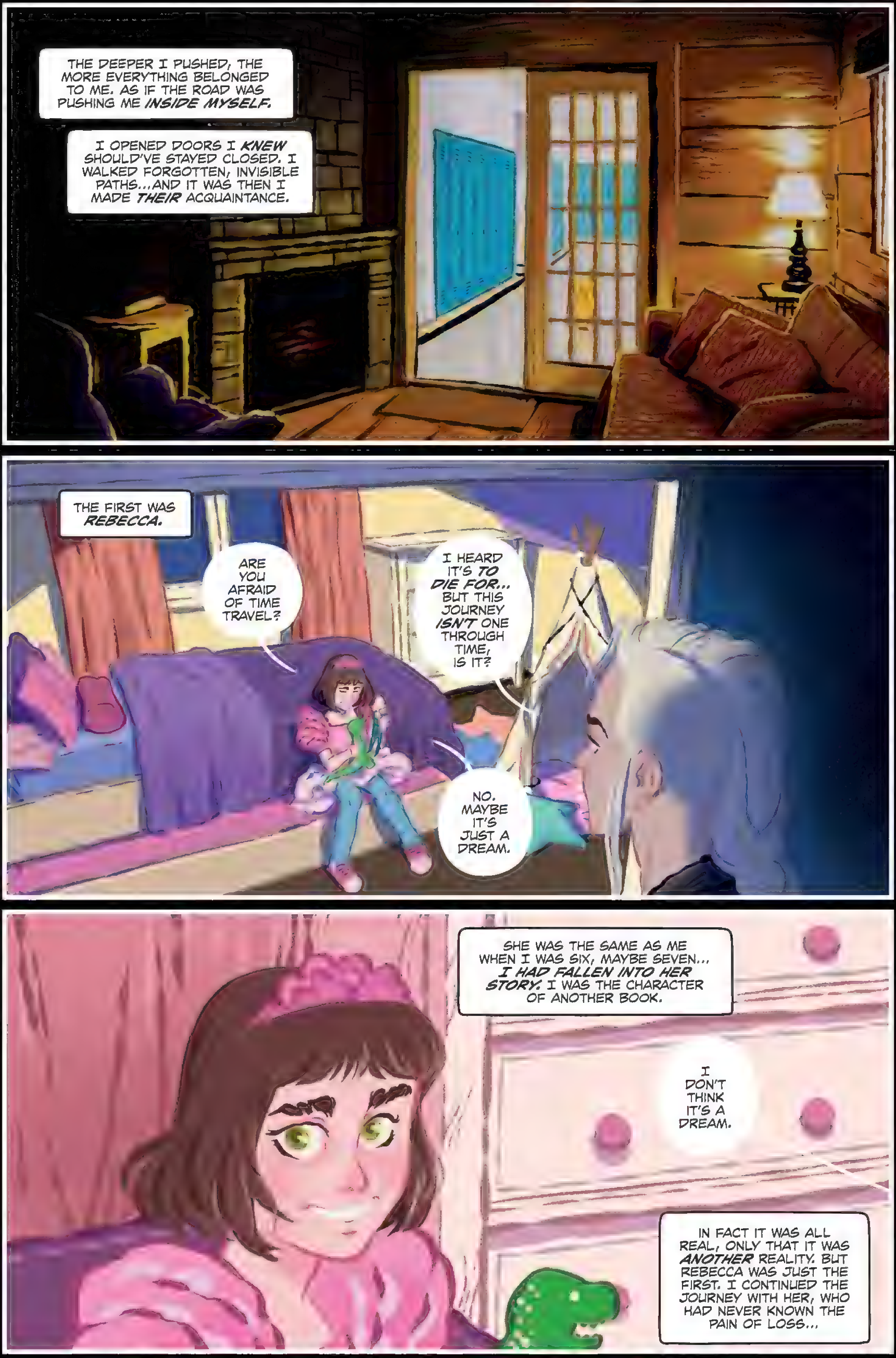

MANHATTAN HAD LOST ITS NIGHT COAT...
FRIDAYS
FRIDAYS
TAXI
NYPD
...WITH THE LIGHT OF TAXIS MIXING WITH THE LIGHT OF FLICKERING ELECTRIC SIGNS.

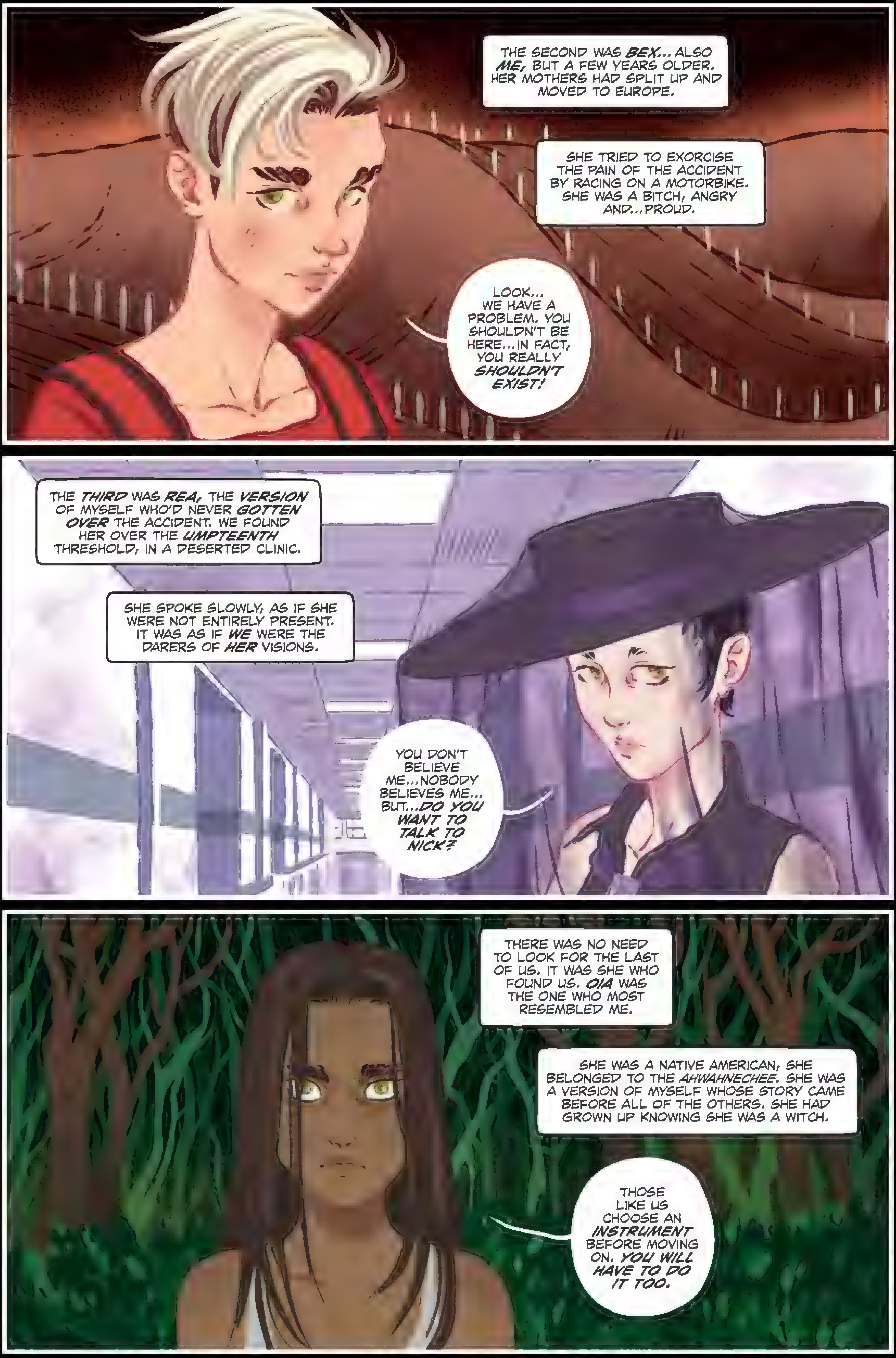

THE EMERALD VORTEX HAD STOPPED THE HEART OF THE WHOLE CITY, MADE EVERYONE GET OUT OF THE CARS AND LEAVE THEIR FAMILIES ON THE STREET...
...NOBODY HAD EVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT.


MOMENTS BEFORE.
I FELL, FEELING NOTHING. BUT ALL I MISSED WAS THE CONCRETE LEDGE BENEATH MY FEET, NOTHING MORE. NO HEART SINKING IN MY CHEST...
...AFTER ALL, I NO LONGER HAD IT.
WAKE UP...
WA...KE... UP.


I LEFT THE ACCIDENT BEHIND, WAKING UP WITHOUT NICK, THE KING'S CLAWS THAT TORE MY HEART OUT...
I WOKE UP, SHAKING OFF THAT GREAT WIDE NIGHTMARE...GASPING FOR AIR.
NGH--
THUD


BUT THAT FEELING DIDN'T LAST LONG. I HAD WOKEN UP IN A DREAM. A WHOLE WORLD THAT HID UNDER THOSE I VISITED EVERY NIGHT.
OH... FUCK.
I WAS LOST.
A PLACE THAT SEEMED TRUER THAN THE REALITY I CAME FROM. WHERE EACH STEP WAS TIRING AND...*IMPORTANT.*
LIKE IN A DREAM, WHEN YOU TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF WHAT YOU'RE SEEING... SO YOU CAN CONTROL IT.
I CROSSED THE FIRST OF MANY THRESHOLDS. I WAS GUIDED ONLY BY A CALL. I FELT I HAD TO BREAK THE SURFACE OF THE PLACES I VISITED.
I HAD TO SINK *DEEPER* AND GET TO THE TRUTHS THAT WERE HIDING BENEATH *ALL* I'D SEEN BEFORE.


THE DEEPER I PUSHED, THE MORE EVERYTHING BELONGED TO ME. AS IF THE ROAD WAS PUSHING ME *INSIDE MYSELF.*
I OPENED DOORS I *KNEW* SHOULD'VE STAYED CLOSED. I WALKED FORGOTTEN, INVISIBLE PATHS...AND IT WAS THEN I MADE *THEIR* ACQUAINTANCE.
THE FIRST WAS *REBECCA.*
ARE YOU AFRAID OF TIME TRAVEL?
I HEARD IT'S *TO DIE FOR...* BUT THIS JOURNEY *ISN'T* ONE THROUGH TIME, IS IT?
NO. MAYBE IT'S JUST A DREAM.
SHE WAS THE SAME AS ME WHEN I WAS SIX, MAYBE SEVEN... *I HAD FALLEN INTO HER STORY.* I WAS THE CHARACTER OF ANOTHER BOOK.
I DON'T THINK IT'S A DREAM.
IN FACT IT WAS ALL REAL, ONLY THAT IT WAS *ANOTHER* REALITY. BUT REBECCA WAS JUST THE FIRST. I CONTINUED THE JOURNEY WITH HER, WHO HAD NEVER KNOWN THE PAIN OF LOSS...


THE SECOND WAS *BEX*... ALSO *ME*, BUT A FEW YEARS OLDER. HER MOTHERS HAD SPLIT UP AND MOVED TO EUROPE.
SHE TRIED TO EXORCISE THE PAIN OF THE ACCIDENT BY RACING ON A MOTORBIKE. SHE WAS A BITCH, ANGRY AND...PROUD.
LOOK... WE HAVE A PROBLEM. YOU SHOULDN'T BE HERE...IN FACT, YOU REALLY *SHOULDN'T EXIST!*
THE *THIRD* WAS *REA*, THE *VERSION* OF MYSELF WHO'D NEVER *GOTTEN OVER* THE ACCIDENT. WE FOUND HER OVER THE *UMPTEENTH* THRESHOLD, IN A DESERTED CLINIC.
SHE SPOKE SLOWLY, AS IF SHE WERE NOT ENTIRELY PRESENT. IT WAS AS IF *WE* WERE THE DARERS OF *HER* VISIONS.
YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME...NOBODY BELIEVES ME... BUT...*DO YOU WANT TO TALK TO NICK?*
THERE WAS NO NEED TO LOOK FOR THE LAST OF US. IT WAS SHE WHO FOUND US. *OIA* WAS THE ONE WHO MOST RESEMBLED ME.
SHE WAS A NATIVE AMERICAN, SHE BELONGED TO THE *AHWAHNECHEE*. SHE WAS A VERSION OF MYSELF WHOSE STORY CAME BEFORE ALL OF THE OTHERS. SHE HAD GROWN UP KNOWING SHE WAS A WITCH.
THOSE LIKE US CHOOSE AN *INSTRUMENT* BEFORE MOVING ON. *YOU WILL HAVE TO DO IT TOO.*

THE FALL
THE DREAM WAS UNLIKE ANY OTHER.
THEY WERE NOT ONLY IMAGES, BUT WORDS, COLORS AND...*NAMES.*
IT WAS A STORY I HAD TO LIVE *INSIDE OF ME...*
...ONLY TO FIND OUT, IN THE END, THAT I WAS NO LONGER ALONE. MAYBE I NEVER HAD BEEN.
MY ANCESTORS, THE OTHER VERSIONS OF MYSELF, THEY WERE SO CLOSE...
BUT AS I WOKE UP, I WAS ALREADY FORGETTING IT, AS IF SOMEONE HAD ABRUPTLY CLOSED THE LAST PAGE OF THE BOOK I WAS READING.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE...

I CHANGED THE RULES.
I WON'T LET YOU PLAY GAMES WITH ME ANYMORE. ***NEVER AGAIN.***
WHAT THE FUCK...
YOU'RE CRAZY! THE WHOLE CITY CAN SEE YOU! THEY'LL KILL YOU...
WE CAN'T...
SPEAK FOR YOURSELF, FER DOIRICH.
I can.
THE VIGIL DOESN'T EXIST, DOES IT, DRUID?
NOW I'LL SHOW YOU WHAT I DREAMED WHILE I WAS FALLING!

I SAW THE WORLD OF MY COVEN AND MY ANCESTORS...
A REALITY GOVERNED BY SYNAESTHESIA, MADE OF IDEAS AS BIG AS MOONS AND STORIES NEVER TOLD. WHERE LANGUAGE IS THE WOMB...
...AND MAGICAL ART IS THE SEED READY TO FERTILIZE IT.
ARE YOU LISTENING TO YOURSELF?! THIS IS NOT YOU!
SHUT UP!
NOBODY REALLY KNOWS WHO I AM...
...EVEN I DON'T KNOW FOR SURE.

YOUR KING TORE MY HEART OUT! YOU LIED TO ME! LADY MACBETH ORGANIZED A RITUAL BEHIND MY BACK!
USE THE FORMULA...
CHANGE HIM!
I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF IT! AND I WILL NEVER BE AFRAID AGAIN!
THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO TO ME! NOT ANYMORE!
I DECIDE THE RULES NOW!
NO, DON'T DO IT!
GIVE HIM A NEW NAME!
...FEAR DOIRICH!

ANF
ANF
ANF
BECAUSE YOU BETRAYED ME, I WANTED TO STEAL YOUR FREEDOM, DIGNITY AND POWER...
BUT I ARRIVED LATE, I SEE.
WHAT A CLICHÉ... THE HORNED IDOL OF THE FOREST BECOMES THE WITCH'S SERVANT.
OH DEAR REBECCA, YOU CHOSE A *BAD* SLAVE. HE TENDS TO BITE THE MASTER'S HAND.
I WOULD ADVISE YOU OTHERWISE BUT... I SUPPOSE THAT LONG-TERM PLANS DON'T INTEREST YOU MUCH.
YOU JUST SPARED ME THE TROUBLE OF LOOKING FOR YOU, BASTARD.

OH NO. PLEASE, LET ME EXPLAIN. YOUR DISPLAY OF POWER LEAVES ME BREATHLESS.
BUT I'M THE *GUARDIAN OF THE SECRET* AND I CAN'T LET HUMANS FIND OUT ABOUT US.
IN THIS SAME INSTANT MY WONDERFUL DEVERA IS TAKING CARE OF YOUR...
...BIZARRE ATMOSPHERIC PHENOMENON.
ntosh
lassic
I GAVE HER A WHOLE UNIT OF SPECIALISTS TO TAKE CARE OF IT...
ALL THE FLAME TROLLS ARE COVERING CHEMTRAILS, EXPERIMENTAL WEAPONS, GLOBULAR LIGHTNINGS, UFOS, SOLAR DOGS AND GLOBAL WARMING!
THE GREMLINS ON SABOTAGE, LAW ENFORCEMENT COMMUNICATIONS, FAKE NEWS AND CORRUPT SPECIALISTS.
I DON'T HEAR YOU TYPING FAST ENOUGH.
GOOD, GOOD... SHARE IT!!!!

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU KNOW I HAVE NOTHING AGAINST YOU, BUT THE WAY YOU ARE USING YOUR LAST DAYS OF LIFE IS...
WOOOOSH
...HOW CAN I SAY?
FTHUM
FTHUM
EXCESSIVE.
FTHUM
ENSLAVE HIM!
WHAT DID YOU WANT, SOME *SCARED SACRIFICIAL LAMB?* SORRY TO *DISAPPOINT,* BUT I *WON'T* BE *BEGGING!*
HIT HIM NOW!
MY DEAR REBECCA...
...IT IS SORRY ONLY IN THAT YOU, LIKE ALL ANTAGONISTS, ARE PATHOLOGICALLY AND HOPELESSLY...
...ALONE.

FER DOIRICH IS STILL OUT OF PLAY.
STAY *BACK*, MAJESTY...SHE'S *DRUNK* WITH POWER, BUT SHE WON'T BE ABLE TO KEEP IT UP FOR LONG...
...I FEEL THE FEAR GROWING IN HER.
...*FEAR*, KARABASAN?
SHOW ME.
IT IS WET LIKE BLACK BLOOD ON THE ASPHALT.
IT IS BRISTLING WITH GLASS BLADES, DEEPLY EMBEDDED IN THE FLESH.
IT IS THE SHADOW OF A LOST PERSON.
THE GAZE OF THOSE WHO DID NOT WANT TO DIE.
YOU ARE LOSING US...
CONCENTRATE!
NICK...

BRING ME THE WITCH.
BECKY...
SKRAM

I *THOUGHT* YOU SAID YOU WERE A *WITCH*... SO *BE ONE!*
DON'T YOU *DARE* GIVE UP! NOT AFTER WHAT YOU *DID* TO ME!
HERE'S ALL THE POWER WE HAVE LEFT...
CHOMP
FZZZ
GET THE KING TO *SAFETY*, IMMEDIATELY.

YOUR MAJEST-- EEEGCK!
TZOK
TZOK
AAAGH!
TZOK
SWUSH
ENOUGH.
YOU WILL PAY FOR WHAT YOU'VE DONE.

YOU CAN'T DEFEAT ME.
I HAVE YOUR HEART.
RRRRRR...
MINE AND THOSE OF MANY OTHERS...
I TOLD YOU I WILL NOT BEG FOR MY LIFE... I OWE THAT TO EVERYONE YOU'VE HURT.
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, I DON'T NEED YOUR LIFE NOW.
I ONLY NEED TO TOUCH YOUR HEART TO MAKE YOU LOVE ME FOREVER.
DON'T YOU WANT TO SPEND THE LAST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE IN A FAIRY PALACE?
DON'T LISTEN TO HIM! FIGHT!
RRR-- YOU'RE BLUFFING...

I'M NOT ASKING YOU TO *DO* ANYTHING, REBECCA... JUST *LET YOURSELF GO.*
FZOT
AH!
MAEVE...
IMPRESSIVE. IN LESS THAN A DAY YOU'VE ALREADY MADE ALLIANCES WITH ALL OF MY ENEMIES.
IT...IT MUST HAVE BEEN WHEN SHE--
...KISSED YOU? OF COURSE.
IT *SEEMS* I HAVE TO *RETHINK* THINGS. YOU SEEMED LIKE SUCH AN *ORDINARY* CREATURE, BUT NOW... YOU'VE BECOME *INTERESTING.*
GRAB
NOW, I THINK... YOU'LL COME WITH ME OF YOUR *OWN* VOLITION.
AFTER ALL...YOU DON'T WANT *HIS* DEATH ON YOUR CONSCIENCE AS *WELL,* DO YOU?
WHO... *WHOSE* DEATH...?

I HATE TO FERRY *ADULTS* ON THE BLACK CHARIOT...BUT *DESPERATE TIMES,* AND ALL THAT.
STRAP
BECKY, HE'S NOT HUMAN! LISTEN TO ME HE'S NOT--
PATRICK!
IT'S SIMPLE: I WANT A YES OR A NO.
IF I HEAR A YES, I WILL TAKE YOU TO THE CASTLE AND YOU AND PATRICK WILL BE MY GUEST.
IF YOU CHALLENGE ME WITH A NO, I WILL MAKE YOU BOTH MY PRISONERS UNTIL THE END OF YOUR DAYS.
THAT IS SUCH BULLSHIT! YOU! KING! RAVEN-DRAGONSTÜRM...
I...
...I...
FWOOM

...CURSE YOU!

Chapter 7

I CLOSED MY EYES AND EVERYTHING DISAPPEARED...
...I THINK I PASSED OUT AGAIN.
IT'S OKAY. WITH THAT *EMPTINESS* IN YOUR CHEST... YOU COULD FALL ASLEEP AT ANY TIME.
WHEN I SAW PATRICK, *I LOST CONTROL.*
THEN SUDDENLY IT WAS JUST...ALL *OVER*, AND I WAS SO TIRED...

BUT THEN AGAIN, EVERY TIME IT *SEEMS* LIKE IT'S OVER...
...IT'S *ANYTHING* BUT.
YOU DID *WELL*...YOU *CURSED* HIM.
I'M SO TIRED...
TIRED FROM THE *TRIP*...YOU TRAVELED ALL THE WAY HERE, TO US.
BUT...I DIDN'T *DO* ANYTHING?
YOU DID. YOU TRAVELED THROUGH THE *DREAMS*... SUCH A THING *IS* WITHIN YOUR POWER.
F
E
A
R
I FELT LIKE I WAS *ALMOST* THERE... ON THE *VERGE* OF SOMETHING...
...LIKE THE *TEARS* HITTING YOUR EYES *SECONDS* BEFORE YOU CRY.

SWEPT INTO THE VOID, TEETERING ON A CLIFF...
...TRAPPED AT THE CENTER OF AN ASTROLABE SPINNING SO FAST IT CLEAVED THE AIR...
...I FELT THE *VICTORY* COMING, AND IT WAS *ALL* SO...
...*PERFECT?*
AH AH AH AH AH
AAAAH!
SKREEEE

EEEE
AGHK!
DAMN... PASSED OUT *AGAIN*...AND ALWAYS AT THE WORST TIME...
...*IS* THERE A GOOD TIME? FUCK.
PATRICK... *HE TOOK PATRICK...* DHARA! MY FAMILY!
THEY'RE ALL IN DANGER!
AND *THIS* IS...A GLOWING GREEN *SOMETHING.*
CAN EVERYONE *ELSE* SEE IT?
AND WHAT ABOUT MY *ANCESTORS?* TARANIS MADE IT SOUND LIKE SHE COULDN'T *SEE* THEM...LIKE I WAS REALLY *ALONE.*

AND THAT *MONSTER*...IT WAS *NICK* ALL ALONG?
WAIT. FUCK. I...I'M TALKING TO MYSELF.
TO *EXCESS.*
SENAPE GREEN + URBAN
SENAPE GREEN + URBAN
21 OFEL
AND--AND NOW...
...I'M *ALL BY MYSELF* TOO.
SENAPE GREEN + URBAN
SENAPE GREEN + URBAN
SENAPE GREEN + URBAN
SENAPE GREEN + URBAN
I'M... ALONE.
21 OFEL
ALONE...
...ALONE. AND...
...*ALONE.*

KRR
I HAVE HEARD THE OWL THAT SHRIEKED, THE FATAL BELLMAN, WHICH GIVES THE STERN'ST *GOOD-NIGHT.*
...HE TOLD ME TO COME TO YOUR AID... AND SO I DID.
LADY MACBETH... HE *TOOK* PATRICK.
AS HE TOOK *FER.* AND BELIEVE ME...HE'S ONLY *JUST* GETTING STARTED.
YOU COULD'VE *HELPED* WITH THIS MESS...BUT YOU *LIED* TO ME. I MIGHT'VE-- I THINK I'VE DONE *HORRIBLE* THINGS...

AND I...HAVE DONE DESPERATE THINGS. I TRIED TO FORCE YOUR POWERS FORTH THROUGH WILL AND RITUAL. I NEARLY LOST MEMBERS OF MY CIRCLE IN THE PROCESS...NOT TO MENTION A VERY PRECIOUS CAULDRON.
SO YOU SEE...WE HAVE BOTH BEEN PUNISHED FOR DARING WHAT WE MAY.
DARING?! I WAS DEFENDING MYSELF!
I KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE. WITH A SINGLE GESTURE YOU WOKE YOUR MAGIC POTENTIAL... AND RIPPED OPEN THE SKY.
YOU DARED.
AND LET ME GUESS...THAT MEANS I CAN NEVER GO BACK TO MY OLD LIFE. THAT FROM NOW ON, THINGS WILL BE...
DIFFERENT.
I HAVE ALREADY DONE SOMETHING FOR YOUR MOTHERS, AND CAN DO THE SAME FOR THE OTHERS YOU LOVE. BUT YOU...
...YOUR HOME, YOUR JOB, YOUR LOVED ONES...YOU MUST LET THEM ALL SLIP AWAY. NOW.
AND FOLLOW ME.
TLACK

DO NOT *FEAR*... THEY CAN NEITHER HEAR NOR SEE US.
...AND JUST *WHAT* IS THAT *BLUE THING*?
--*REPORTS* COMING IN FROM... AM I READING THIS RIGHT? THE "NATIONAL UFO REPORTING CENTER"? WHICH NAMES MANHATTAN AS THE SITE OF AN ALIEN INCURSION... THE LATEST OF 27 SUPPOSED ATTACKS THIS YEAR.
CNN
I SEE NOTHING BLUE, BUT I ASSUME YOU'RE REFERRING TO THE *CHANGELING*.
I CREATED A *SIMULACRUM* OF PURE MAGIC TO TAKE YOUR PLACE.
AND... IT'S SAFE? IT'S JUST A SPELL?
"JUST"? IT'S YOUR EXACT RECREATION, WOVEN FROM THE STUFF OF WONDER. IT'S NOT "JUST" ANYTHING.
BUT YES, IT IS SAFE...AND WILL SERVE OUR PURPOSE.

SO TAKE *ONE LAST LOOK*, AND WHATEVER YOU NEED...AND THEN WE *GO*.
HOW DO I EVEN *KNOW* WHAT WE NEED? WON'T THEY NOTICE THINGS *MISSING*?
rebel rebel
WITH THE WINDOW LEFT OPEN, THEY'LL IMAGINE *THEFT*, NOT *SORCERY*.
AND *DO* TAKE SOMETHING THAT BELONGS TO EACH OF YOUR LOVED ONES. I'LL NEED THE *TRINKETS* TO PROTECT THEM.
I DON'T BELIEVE I'M *DOING* THIS...WITH *YOU*.
I AM *STRANGE* COMPANY, I'LL ADMIT. I'VE BEEN KNOWN TO BE UNUSUALLY... *FOCUSED*.
IT'S NOT ABOUT THAT.
IT *FEELS* LIKE *EVERYONE'S* ABANDONING ME.
BUT REALLY... *I'M* THE ONE ABANDONING THEM.

I'M *DECEIVING* MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS, HURTING THEM ALL. AND THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW IT.
I WON'T BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS. I'LL NEVER GO BACK TO MY JOB.
I'LL NEVER GET TO *THANK* THEM FOR THEIR BIRTHDAY GIFTS OR APOLOGIZE TO *DHARA*.
MY OLD LIFE, AND EVERYONE IN IT...ENDS *HERE*. WITH A *LIE*.
I *HATE* IT...SO WHY DON'T I JUST *STOP*?
Lexington Av
Island
Queensbridge
76c
45c
343c
142c
Columbus Cir
5 Av
Lexington Av
Queensboro Plaza
59 St
Midtown 57 St
57 St
40c
40c
7 Av
36c
36c
5 Av
40c
Lexington Av
49c
40c
36c
51 St
223c
50 St
49 St
47 St 50 St Rockefeller Center
31c
21 St
40c
31c
42 St Bryant Park
49c
338c
Times Sq 42 St
31c
5 Av
22c
42 St Grand Central
Vernon Blvd Jackson Av
36c
31c
45c
34 St Herald Sq
34 St
27c
33 St
22c
22c
28 St
28 St
28 St
49c
27c
18c
22c
23 St
23 St
23 St
23 St
22c
18 St
22c
31c
31c
Canal St
Grand St
East Broadway
151c
Canal St
Canal St
22c
49c
45c
36c
169c
Chambers St Church St
City Hall
Brooklyn Bridge Chambers St
27c
Chambers St
22c
Park Pl
31c
WTC
40c
209c
62c
Cortlandt St
36c
Fulton St
129c
53c
High St Brooklyn Bridge
22c
22c
67c
Rector St
Rector St
Wall St
Wall St
Jay St MetroTech
18c
Broad St

BACK RUB & FOOT RUB
MASSAGE FOOT RUB
WE'VE ARRIVED. THIS IS THE *SHOP* I SPOKE OF.
WE WALKED ALL OVER MANHATTAN... FOR *HERBAL* MEDICINE? COULD'VE FOUND THAT A HALF-HOUR FROM THE *VILLAGE*.
THIS SHOP ALONE HAS WHAT WE NEED.
晚上好。
晚上好。我们寻找门。
WITH ALL YOU'VE *EXPERIENCED*... I TRUST YOU KNOW HOW IT WORKS?
SURE... JUST LIKE A *STARGATE*.
I'LL *DO* THIS, BUT YOU HAVE TO *SWEAR* TO PROTECT MY FRIENDS. NO LIES. NO TRICKS... AND BY *ANY* MEANS NECESSARY.
BY *ANY* MEANS NECESSARY? *BOLD WORDS* TO SPEAK TO LADY MACBETH...
SO BE IT, WITCH.

WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU PATRICK...
YOU AND BECKY ARE GOING TO GIVE ME A *HEART ATTACK*... PICK UP!
SSSH
FUCK...

COME ON, MOM! IT'S JUST A *JOB*! I CAN FIND ANOTHER ONE...
...NOT TO MENTION, MY *BLOG* IS DOING GREAT! I'M FINE!
I'LL *BE* FINE, OKAY? I'VE GOT PLENTY OF SAVINGS... I DON'T NEED YOUR MONEY! CAN YOU *TRUST* ME FOR ONCE?
HERE WE GO, THE *FINAL* CHARGE...
SSSH
WHAT? NO--I'M NOT TALKING TO YOU, MOM. I AM *NOW* THOUGH. AND I'M SERIOUS! JUST *LISTEN* TO ME...
...I HAVEN'T BEEN *GAMING* IN *MONTHS*! I HAD A *PROBLEM*, I WAS *OBSESSED*...BUT I'M *DONE* WITH THAT, OKAY?
I'M A NEW PERSON NOW.

AWF
AWF
AWF
AWF
SSSH
AH! WHAT THE FUCK...?!
BECKY...

MOTOR CRASH
?
NICK
SOPHIE
DHARA
MEERA
CLAIRE
BECKY
PATRICK
???
A...*MARK?* IT MEANS IT'S *TIME.*
I *HOPED* IT WOULDN'T BE SO SOON, BUT...HERE WE *GO.*
QUI SCIT SANARE...
...SCIT DESTRUERE.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN FAIRIES, LITTLE LAWRENCE?

BECAUSE IF SO... TODAY IS ABOUT TO PROVE *FORTUITOUS*.
YOU HAVE JUST BEEN *CHOSEN* FOR A *GREAT ADVENTURE*.
WHO... ARE YOU?
WHY... I'M THE *KING*, LITTLE ONE. RULER OF ALL THE FAERIES, TROLLS AND GOBLINS. ALL THE MERMAIDS, GIANTS, DRAGONS AND GNOMES.
AND... ARE YOU A *GOOD* KING?
OH, YOU *SWEET* CHILD... THERE *ARE* NO GOOD KINGS.
TAKE HIM.

WHAT A *FINE AND WONDERFUL EVENING*, MY GOOD DULLAHAN... SHALL WE *GO?*
THE *INCANTATION*, SIRE...IF YOU WILL?
OH, YES. OF *COURSE*, MY DEAR FRIEND...
DULLAHAN, LULLAHAN, ULLAHAN...
...RUN HARD ON THE BLACK AND FATAL HORSE!
DULLAHAN, LULLAHAN, ULLAHAN...
...I KNOW YOUR NAME AND YOUR CURSE!

YOU'LL LIVE *WELL* HERE IN *DARQUEFORT*, LITTLE LAWRENCE.
YOU WILL WORSHIP *DEVERA*, AS DO WE ALL, EVEN IF YOU REQUIRE A *BIT* OF PRACTICE...
SACRIFICES HAVE BEEN MADE. THE LAST HEART WAS TAKEN. THE LAST TRUE DREAMER HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO SAFETY.
AND HERE WE ARE.

WE'LL *PARTY* EVERY NIGHT! RIGHT UP UNTIL THE NEXT *SAMHAIN*!
WE'LL MAKE *SURE* THESE *DEADLY PUPS* ARE FED ONLY THE *CHOICEST* OF MORSELS...
...AND *EVERY MORNING*, HEAR THEM TELL OF THE *DREAMS* THEY'VE HAD THE NIGHT BEFORE.
IN THE MEANTIME... SEND FOR *MEDEA*! THERE IS A *LONG RITUAL* TO PREPARE!
I WANT TO SEE THIS WELL *SHINING* WITH MAGIC!

IT IS *PAINFUL* TO NO LONGER BE ABLE TO TRUST YOUR *OWN* WILD HUNT, BUT ALAS... HERE WE ARE.
FIRST... IT WAS THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF *ARACH*. WHO WOULD HAVE *GUESSED* THAT MY *EVERY HUNTER* WOULD FOLLOW HER IN FAILURE?
IT SEEMS I *TRULY* MUST LABOR ALONE.
TAK
TAK
TAK
TAK
...*ALONE*, TARANIS?
TAK
TAK

WOULD THAT MEAN *I* AM *UNWELCOME?*

YOU...WHEN WE MET, YOU WERE THE BLOODY CURATOR, THE OFFICIANT OF FATAL RITUALS, THE BRIDE TO HEROES...
...THE ONLY WOMAN TO HAVE WORN THE GOLDEN FLEECE, THE DAUGHTER OF HECATE. MANY NAMES, MANY TITLES...
...BUT TO ME, NOW, AND FOREVER...
...YOU WILL *ALWAYS* BE MY *MEDEA*.
MY KING... I DON'T BELIEVE I'VE *EVER* SEEN YOU SO BEAUTIFUL.
AND YOU... YOU NEVER *CHANGE*, MY MUSE.

BUT YOU HAVE CHANGED... DEEPLY. YOU ARE NOW THE FAIRY KING.
YOU SACRIFICED ALL, EVEN YOUR FAMILY... BUT FINALLY, YOU'VE GRASPED YOUR DESTINY.
AH AH AH
A SACRIFICE THAT YOU FIND ALL TOO FAMILIAR, I'M SURE!
BY THE GODS, I'VE MISSED YOU, MEDEA.
...REALLY? BECAUSE I'D HAVE THOUGHT I WAS TURNED AWAY FROM YOU TO HIDE MY MAGIC.
NAMECRAFT. THE ART OF NAMES...WHICH YOUR SUBJECTS BELIEVE IS YOUR DOMINION ALONE.
CHANGING THE NAME OF SOMETHING MEANS BEING IN CONTROL OF ITS SHAPE, ITS ESSENCE AND ITS DESTINY. THAT'S WHY THEY FEAR YOU.
YES, WHICH IS WHY WE HAVE OUR VERY SPECIFIC AGREEMENT, ENCHANTRESS. I BRING YOU THE RIGHT SACRIFICES, AND YOU...
...LEND ME YOUR SERVICES.
IT DOES SEEM YOU'VE BROUGHT ME WHAT I LIKE, MY SOVEREIGN...
...BUT SURELY YOU DON'T THINK THIS IS SACRIFICE ENOUGH FOR ALL OF MANHATTAN?

I DREW THESE *NINE* LITTLE DREAMERS OUT OF THEIR BEDS.
I *PERSONALLY* STOLE THEM FROM THEIR SAFE, TINY LIVES.
I'VE *SAVED* ALL THEIR TEARS, EVEN THOSE OF THE ONES WHO'VE SINCE *LOST* THE ABILITY TO CRY.
WITH THOSE TEARS, I FED THE HEARTS OF THE WITCHES YOU NAMED.
SEVEN TIMES SEVEN, YOU DEMANDED. AND SEVEN TIMES SEVEN...I HAVE DELIVERED.
THE CHILDREN ARE DRAWING *THE CITY* NEARER AS THEY DREAM EVERY NIGHT, AND ALL IS PREPARED FOR THE NEXT *SAMHAIN.*
BUT THE *RITUAL* IS STILL FAR IN THE FUTURE. WHILE *WE* ARE SO VERY *CLOSE* IN THE NOW...
...DON'T YOU THINK, *MY BELOVED?*
I THINK... YOU SHOULD TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES, MY KING.

KREE
KREE

ARACH.
MY GREAT WEAVER, *CAPTAIN* OF MY *WILD HUNT*...
DO YOU HAVE THE INFORMATION I ASKED FOR?
YES, GREAT WEAVER... I'VE HEARD IT ALL.
THEN IT'S *TIME* AT LAST... FOR MY *REVENGE* ON THOSE THAT *HUMILIATED* ME.
GO. NOW. FIND *LADY MACBETH*... AND TELL HER *EVERYTHING*.

Chapter 8

CAMAGNI AFTER BLEVIS & PALMER

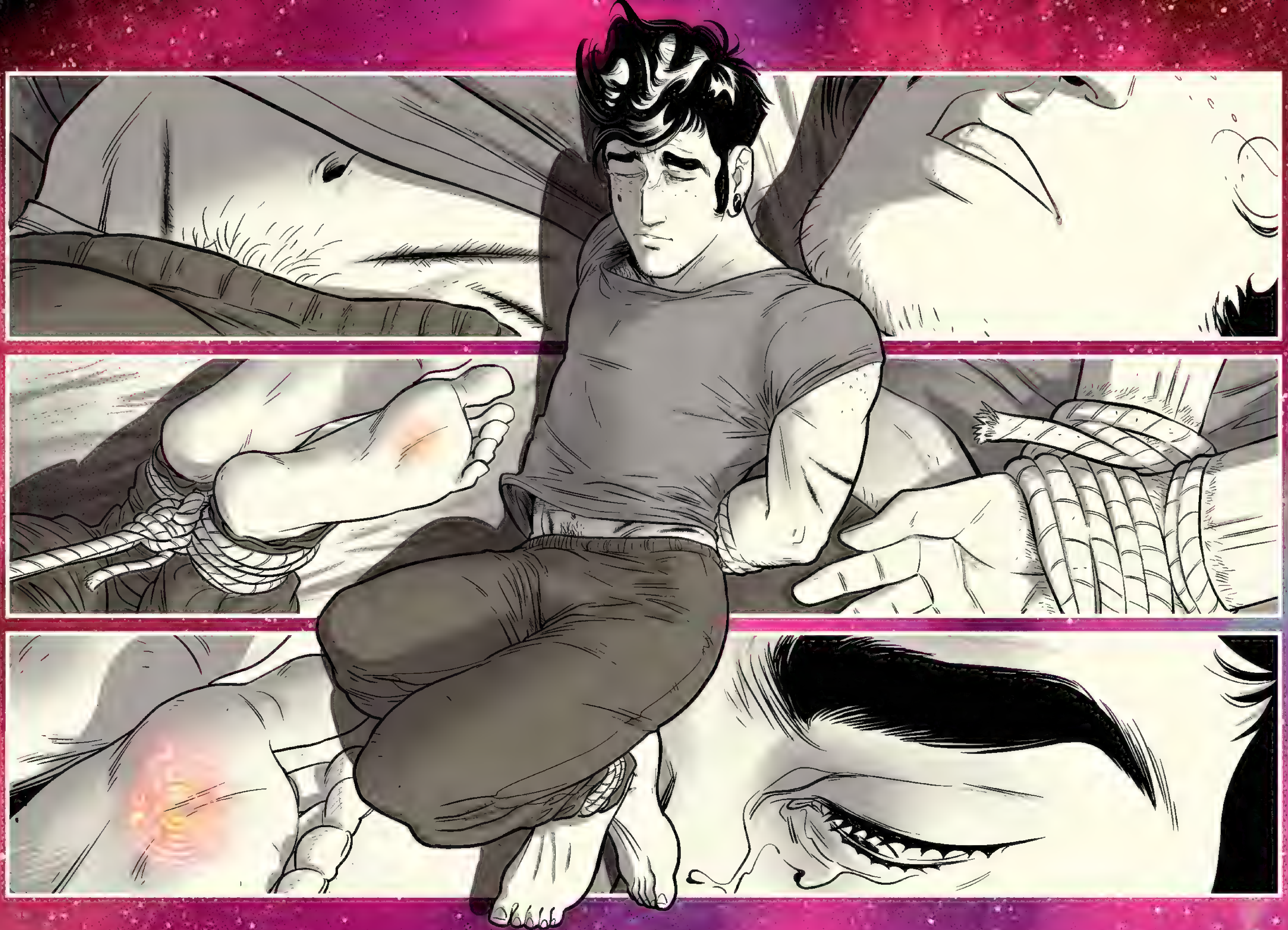
NORTH BROTHER ISLAND.
THIS IS THE PLACE WHERE MY MANOR STANDS, WHERE MY COVEN HAS MET FOR CENTURIES.

WELL, WE'RE FINALLY *HERE.*
FINALLY? IT WOULD BE *DIFFICULT* TO MOVE MUCH FASTER.
I *THINK* I KNOW HOW TO TELEPORT...I'VE DONE IT ENOUGH. BUT I *STILL* DON'T KNOW WHAT IT HAS TO DO WITH *DREAMS?*
YOU DON'T KNOW IT *ALL*, BUT WHAT YOU KNOW *IS IMPRESSIVE*, REBECCA.
IT CAN TAKE WITCHES *YEARS* TO MASTER *TRANSPORT CHARMS.*
WELL, I DIDN'T HAVE YEARS, LADY MACBETH. *PATRICK'S* STILL MISSING, AND WELL...THEN THERE'S *FER.* I'VE GOT TO LEARN *FAST.*
YOU AND THE *HOST* OF *SPIRITS* THAT *REFUSE* TO LEAVE YOUR SIDE?
I'LL REMIND YOU YOU'RE NOT THE *ONLY* ONE WITH A *CLOSE RELATIONSHIP* TO THE DEAD.
GRAB
THEY HAVE *GOOD INTENTIONS*, BUT WE'RE *STILL* WORKING OUT THE *DETAILS* OF OUR RELATIONSHIP. YOU WEREN'T *THERE* ON THAT ROOF...
WHAT I *DID*, WELL...I BASICALLY WENT *BERSERK.*

DO...YOU *REALLY* LIVE IN THIS PLACE ALL BY YOURSELF?
THOSE WHO ONCE OCCUPIED THIS PLACE ARE *FAR* FROM BEING *ALIVE.*
I HOPE *THIS* ROOM WILL SUFFICE.
THE KITCHEN IS *DOWNSTAIRS.* IF YOU'RE COLD, I'D ADVISE HOT TEA AND A HUNT FOR BLANKETS.
BUT YOU WILL BE *SAFE* ON THIS ISLAND, REBECCA KUMAR...THE *KING* CANNOT SET FOOT HERE.
STARTING TOMORROW... I SHALL PROVIDE *PLAUSIBLE REASONS* FOR YOU TO *TRUST* ME ONCE MORE.
THUMP
I JUST HOPE THERE'S A SHOWER...
...AND *WORKING* ELECTRICITY...
...AND COFFEE...
...SOMEWHERE.

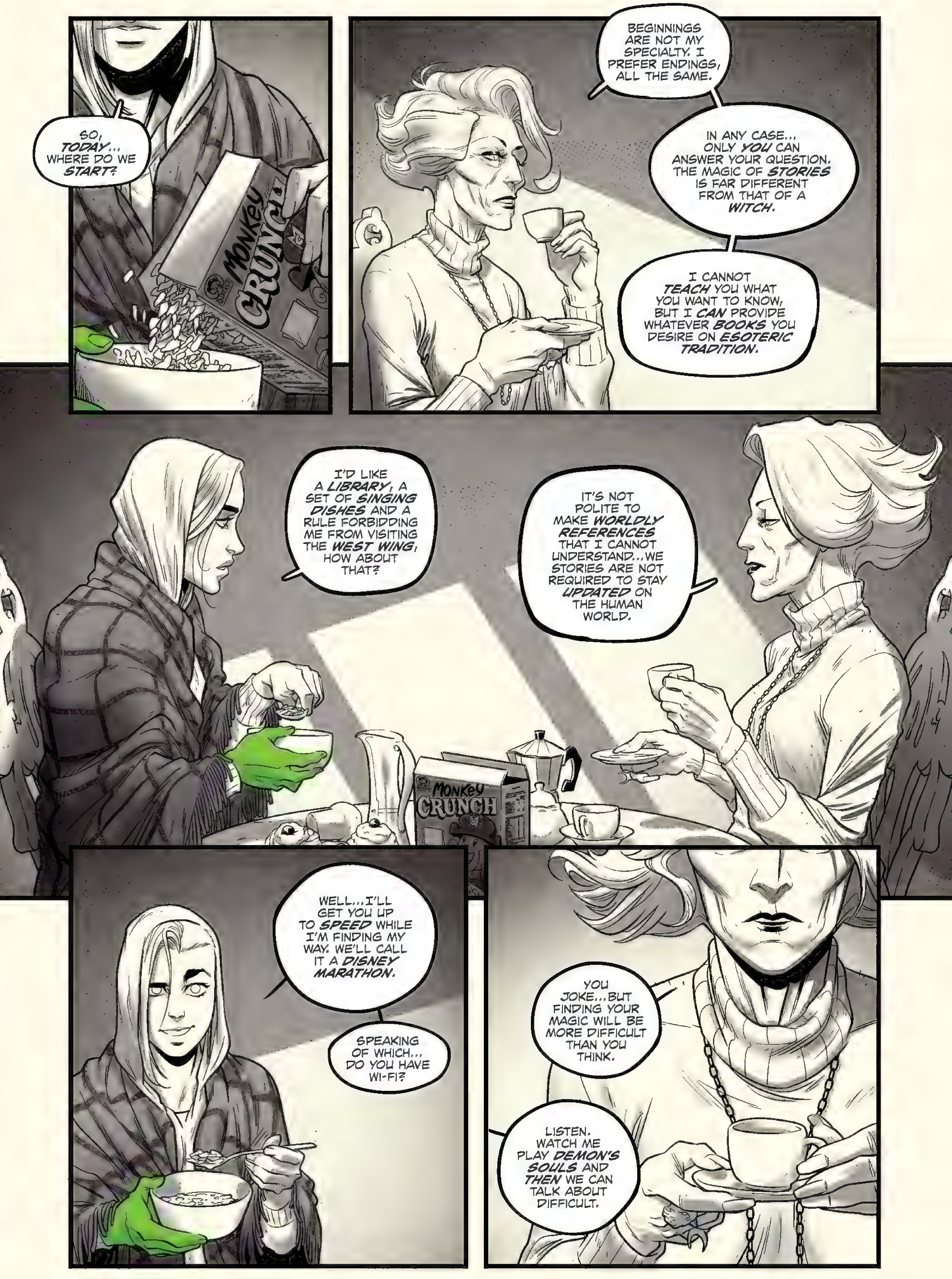
BECKY. WAKE UP. STOP SLEEPING!
MMM... OKAY, SO NOW *EVERY SINGLE TIME* I FALL ASLEEP...
...YOU WAKE UP HERE. CORRECT.
ARE YOU A PIXIE?
...A PIXEL, ACTUALLY.
ARE YOU KIDDING ME?
NOT AT ALL. I AM A SINGLE POINT.
EACH SINGLE POINT IS ON PRINCIPLE THE SAME. UNGENEROUS. IMMORTAL AND IMMUTABLE.
E N T O
P A N
BUT IT WAS YOU WHO GAVE ME A SHAPE. DISTINGUISHED ME FROM THE REST IN ORDER TO IMAGINE ME.

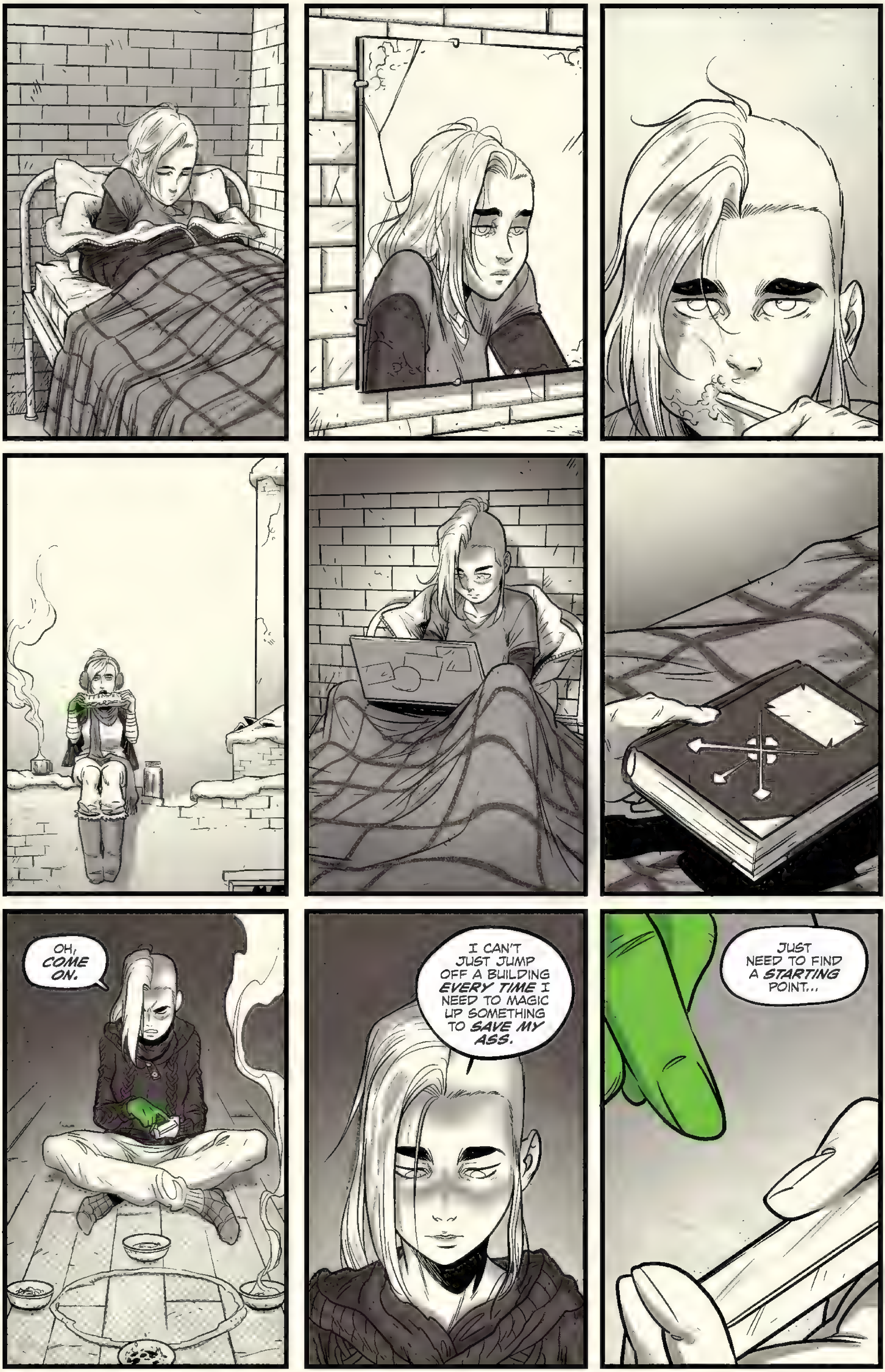
SO IT IS...WITH THE SINGLE LEGO, THE SINGLE BLOCK IN MINECRAFT, THE QUANTUM IN PHYSICS... OR THE PIXEL.
BUT THOSE *IMAGES* ARE ALL... PATRICK?
WHO? AH...NO. THAT IS JUST FEAR. SOMETHING YOU DO NOT NEED.
YOU ARE LOOKING FOR THE STARTING POINT. THE STARTING POINT TO BUILD YOUR PARADIGM.
AND IN YOUR DREAMS YOU CAN SHAPE ANYTHING. I AM YOUR DOJO, YOUR WHITE SHEET, YOUR HOGWARTS!
FIND ME AND YOU WILL HAVE EVERYTHING.
BUT THIS IS...
WHAT YOU WILL BECOME IF ONLY YOU HAVE THE COURAGE TO BE.
UNGENEROUS, IMMORTAL AND IMMUTABLE...LIKE EVERYTHING.



MMM...?
AH, THERE YOU ARE...I OFTEN PUT YOU TO SLEEP JUST FOR THE PLEASURE OF WATCHING YOU WAKE UP.
YOU THINK IT WAS ALL JUST A DREAM, RIGHT?
WAKING DOES NOT EXIST, MY BOY, AND THIS IS A DREAM FROM WHICH IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO ESCAPE.
WHERE...?
YOU'RE EQUIDISTANT FROM ALL PLACES, AND THEREFORE YOU'VE NEVER BEEN FURTHER FROM HOME.
THERE ARE THOSE WHO USE THIS SPACE ONLY TO MOVE FROM ONE POINT OF REALITY TO ANOTHER...
BUT I FIND IT HAS ITS OWN CHARM AS AN ANNEX FOR GUESTS.
IF BECKY ISN'T HERE, MY BOY, THEN I HAVE TO FIND A NEW WAY TO SPEND THE TIME.
IF BECKY ISN'T HERE THEN...
AGH-
GRAB
HAHAHA! LOOK HOW YOU STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE! SUCH A RICH FIGHTING SPIRIT...
SSSH
...NOW I REALLY WANT TO GET IT ALL OUT OF YOU.

FUCK...IT'S *FREEZING* HERE AT NIGHT.
AND THE *MORNING'S* EVEN WORSE.
DAYLIGHT IS MY WITNESS. IT'S AMAZING, BUT YOU LOOK EVEN WORSE THAN LAST NIGHT.
THERE'S THE GOOD MORNING I WAS LOOKING FOR.
I TRUST THE *STAY* HAS BEEN TO YOUR *LIKING*, MY DEAR?
I VISITED *EDINBURGH* MY LAST YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL. I'VE SLEPT IN *WORSE* PLACES.
CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY...YOU'RE *SLANDERING* MY HOMELAND.
UM... *RIGHT*.

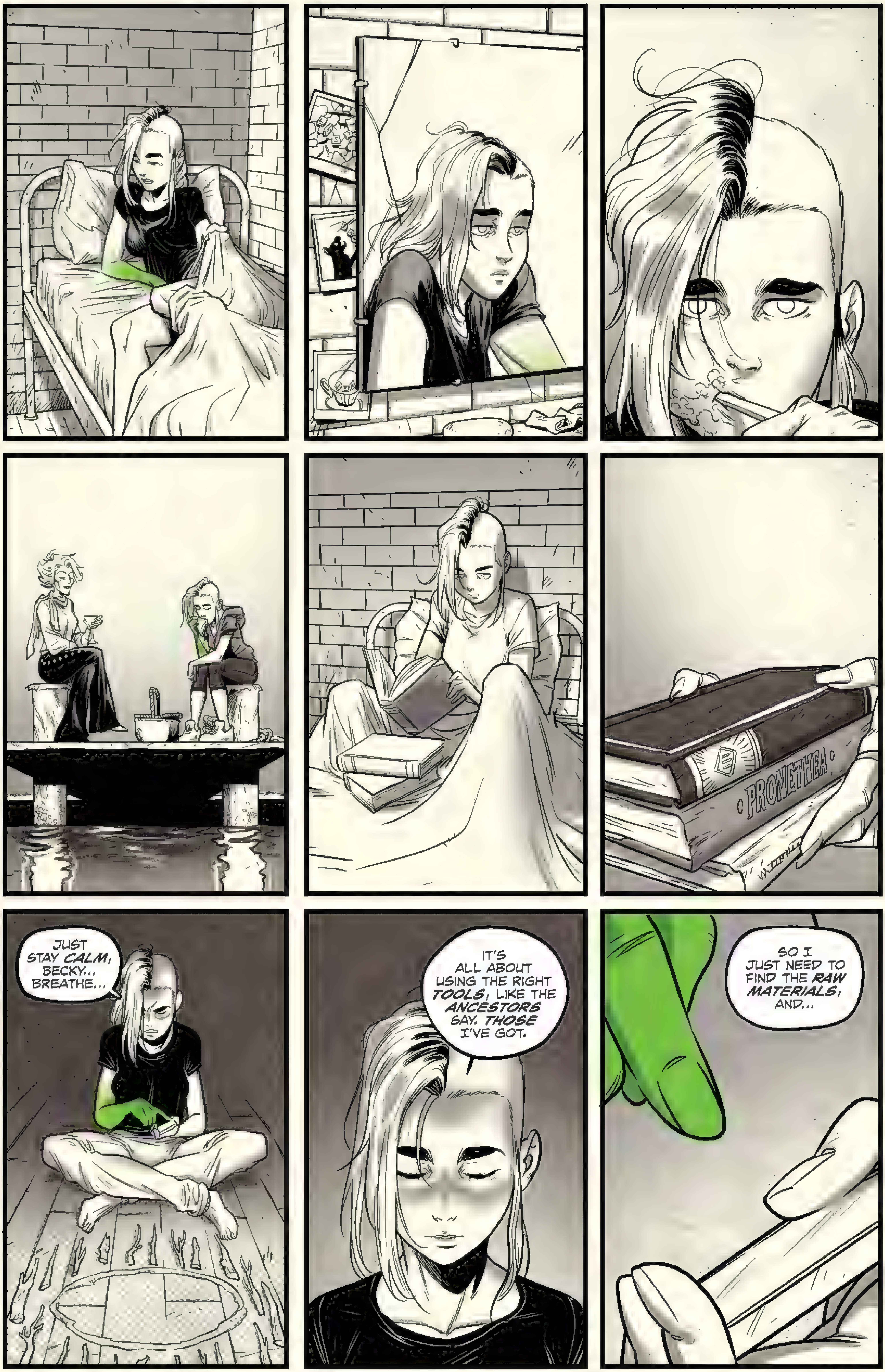

SO, *TODAY*... WHERE DO WE *START*?
MONKEY CRUNCH
BEGINNINGS ARE NOT MY SPECIALTY. I PREFER ENDINGS, ALL THE SAME.
IN ANY CASE... ONLY *YOU* CAN ANSWER YOUR QUESTION. THE MAGIC OF *STORIES* IS FAR DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF A *WITCH*.
I CANNOT *TEACH* YOU WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW, BUT I *CAN* PROVIDE WHATEVER *BOOKS* YOU DESIRE ON *ESOTERIC TRADITION*.
I'D LIKE A *LIBRARY*, A SET OF *SINGING DISHES* AND A RULE FORBIDDING ME FROM VISITING THE *WEST WING*, HOW ABOUT THAT?
IT'S NOT POLITE TO MAKE *WORLDLY REFERENCES* THAT I CANNOT UNDERSTAND...WE STORIES ARE NOT REQUIRED TO STAY *UPDATED* ON THE HUMAN WORLD.
MONKEY CRUNCH
WELL...I'LL GET YOU UP TO *SPEED* WHILE I'M FINDING MY WAY. WE'LL CALL IT A *DISNEY MARATHON*.
SPEAKING OF WHICH... DO YOU HAVE WI-FI?
YOU JOKE...BUT FINDING YOUR MAGIC WILL BE MORE DIFFICULT THAN YOU THINK.
LISTEN. WATCH ME PLAY *DEMON'S SOULS* AND *THEN* WE CAN TALK ABOUT DIFFICULT.


OH, *COME ON.*
I CAN'T JUST JUMP OFF A BUILDING *EVERY TIME* I NEED TO MAGIC UP SOMETHING TO *SAVE MY ASS.*
JUST NEED TO FIND A *STARTING* POINT...

FEBRUARY, IMBOLC.
I SPENT CHRISTMAS DAY ALONE. NEW YEAR'S EVE WAS EVEN WORSE. LADY MACBETH INSISTS ON HAVING DINNER TOGETHER.
SOMEONE BRINGS US SUPPLIES BY SHIP, I SEE HIM ARRIVE AT DAWN. LIFE ON THE ISLAND SUCKS.
STUDYING MAGIC IS LIKE BEING IN A QUANTUM PHYSICS CLASS WHEN YOU NEVER TOOK BASIC EARTH SCIENCE. THERE'S ALWAYS A KEY THING YOU DON'T KNOW.
THE SNOW'S TAKING FOREVER TO MELT, WE *BARELY* HAVE ANY HOT WATER. IT FEELS LIKE THIS'LL NEVER END.

IT'S INCREDIBLE...
OK, *BUT DO YOU THINK IT'S NORMAL?!*
NO, OF *COURSE* IT'S NOT NORMAL...IT'S *PATRICK!*
FOR *YEARS* HE DREAMED OF PISSING OFF HIS PARENTS...
...BUT WHY WOULD HE DISAPPEAR FROM *OUR* LIVES? WE'VE CALLED HIM EVERY FIVE MINUTES, HE HASN'T BEEN ONLINE *ONCE!*
COME ON, DHARA! HE POSTS ALL THE TIME ON INSTAGRAM. HE LOOKS SUPER HAPPY! HE'S BACKPACKING ACROSS SOUTHEAST ASIA!
HE AND THIS GUY...AM I THE *ONLY* ONE HAPPY THAT PATRICK'S FINALLY GETTING HIS *GREAT LOVE STORY?*
LOVE? WELL...IT'S SOMETHING. BUT EVEN IF THEY'RE POSTING *BULLSHIT,* WE KNOW THEY'RE *FINE.*
BUT DIDN'T PATRICK LIKE *NERDY TYPES?* WHO WOULD'VE THOUGHT HE'D FALL FOR SUCH A *MEATY GUY?*
I MEAN COME ON, *WHAT A FUCKING BODY...*

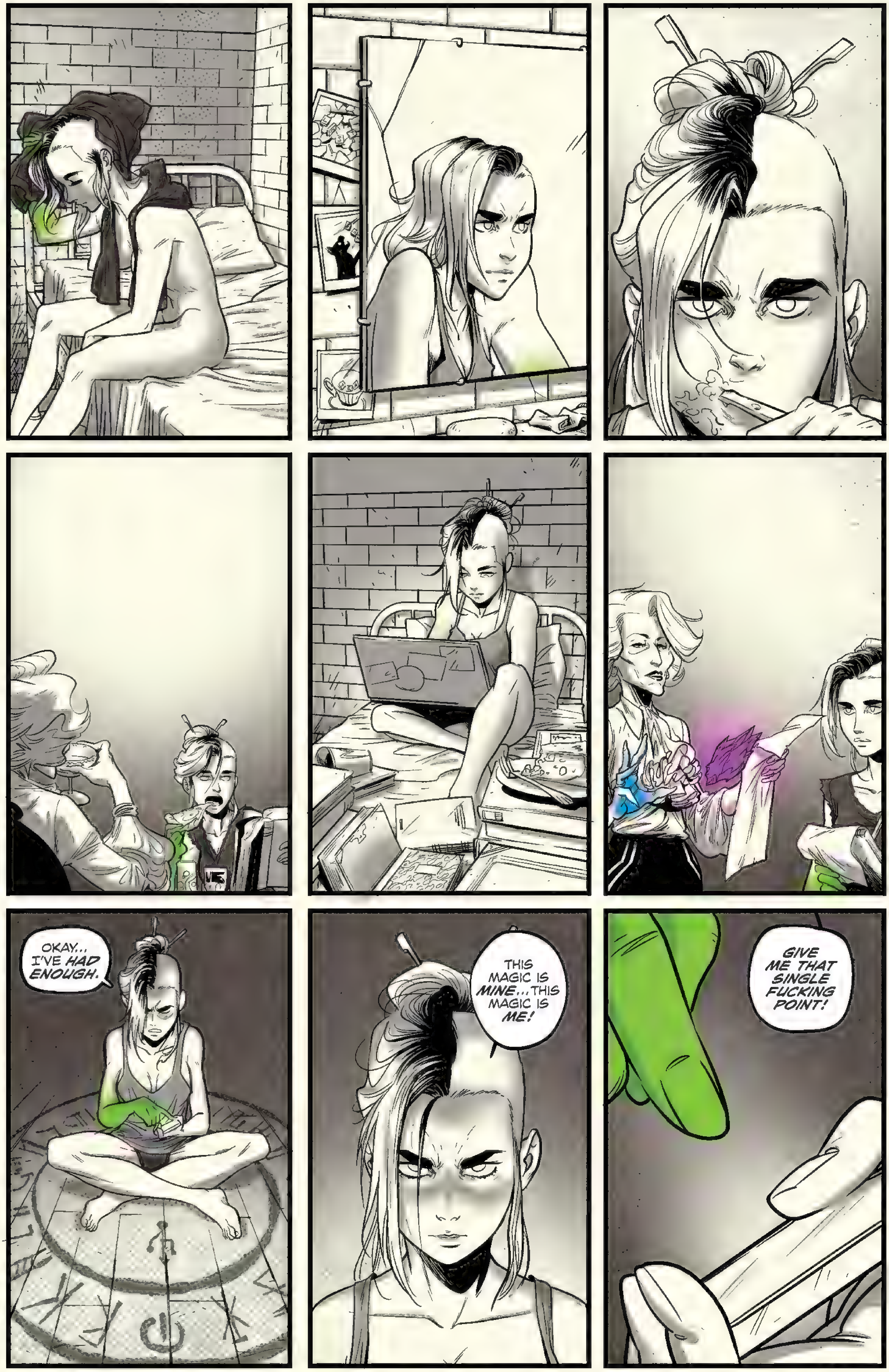
IF YOU ASK ME, THOSE TWO ARE MY *FAVORITE* SHIP.
GIRLS, PLEASE...I DON'T WANT THESE IMAGES IN MY MIND.
LOOK! I SCREENCAPPED HIS IG STORY. IT'S BASICALLY *PORN*!
ANDREW! HEY! HERE'S ANOTHER PIC! PUT *THIS* IN YOUR MIND!
BECKY! YOU'RE *KILLING* ME HERE...
DLING
EXIT
MMM?
FALSE IMAGES...SHOWN BY *ILLUSORY* PEOPLE... IT'S ALMOST IRONIC.
YOU DON'T DESERVE THIS, GUYS...
...IT'S NOT RIGHT.


PROMETHEA
JUST STAY *CALM*, BECKY... BREATHE...
IT'S ALL ABOUT USING THE RIGHT *TOOLS*, LIKE THE *ANCESTORS* SAY. *THOSE* I'VE GOT.
SO I JUST NEED TO FIND THE *RAW MATERIALS*, AND...

MAY, BELTANE.
I'VE FIGURED OUT ***TRANSPORT CHARMS*** FOR REAL NOW, SO I CAN COME AND GO TO MANHATTAN AS I PLEASE.
BUT EVERYTHING'S ***DIFFERENT*** THERE. THAT OLD WORLD OF MINE IS BLACK AND WHITE, AND ITS ***COLORS NOW*** ARE NOT ITS OWN.
...JUST LIKE MY ***ARM*** IS NOT MY OWN, LIKE MAYBE MY ***LIFE*** IS NOT. AT LEAST IT FEELS THAT WAY. MY ANCESTORS WHISPER AS I FALL ASLEEP EACH NIGHT, SAYING I'M MAGIC, SAYING I'M NOT LIKE ANYONE ELSE.
BUT EVEN SO, ALL I CAN THINK ABOUT IS *D&D* AND *FINAL FANTASY*. I TRIED IT ***ALL***... BUT ***NOTHING***.
MEANWHILE IT'S TURNING INTO SPRING OUTSIDE AND I MISS CENTRAL PARK...AND PATRICK.

LOOK AT YOURSELF, FER. SHE TURNED YOU INTO A *FAMILIAR*... A *SLAVE*.
I COULDN'T IMAGINE SWEETER JUSTICE FOR SOMEONE WHO BETRAYED ME.
I WANT TO INTRODUCE YOU TO A FRIEND OF MINE WHO'S GOING TO HELP YOU TELL ME HOW THINGS WENT...
BUT FIRST... *WHAT DID YOU DO TO ONCHU?*
NNNGH
TZAK
OH, *COME ON...* HOW MANY TIMES WILL YOU HAVE TO RELIVE THAT SAME MOMENT BEFORE YOU *COLLAPSE?*
NEEDLESS TO SAY, *JASON* DIDN'T LEAVE ME WITH A GOOD IMPRESSION, FER...AND *YOU* WEIGH *HALF* WHAT HE DID.
SOMEHOW I KNEW WE'D END UP TALKING ABOUT YOUR EX-HUSBAAAAAAAA--
AAAARGH...
...AND BLAH BLAH BLAH. WITH THE ART OF NAMES I CAN READ EVERYTHING YOU HIDE BEHIND YOUR WORDS.
FINALLY... THAT'S WHAT THE KING WAS LOOKING FOR.

ENOUGH OF THIS...MAGIC IS LIKE SEX. I CAN'T *GO ON* UNLESS YOU'RE WILLING TO *FULLY* UNDRESS...
LET'S GET THIS DAMN *DWARVEN CRYSTAL* OFF OF YOU...
...I WANT TO SEE YOU FOR WHO YOU REALLY ARE.
STOP! I HAVEN'T TAKEN IT *OFF* IN--
--FAR TOO LONG A TIME.
CLING
MAGNIFICENT. NOW...SHALL WE GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER A BIT BETTER?
GRROOOWL


OKAY... I'VE HAD ENOUGH.
THIS MAGIC IS MINE... THIS MAGIC IS ME!
GIVE ME THAT SINGLE FUCKING POINT!

AUGUST, LUGHNASADH.
EVERYTHING IS POISON AND NOTHING EXISTS WITHOUT POISON. REALITY IS AGAINST ME, NOT MAGIC.
BUT ONLY BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW ITS LANGUAGE AND I DON'T KNOW HOW MAGIC AND REALITY CAN COEXIST.
MY *HAND* IS THE ANSWER...I'M A LIVING BEING STRADDLING WORLDS, AFTER ALL. HAVE *OTHER* WITCHES FIGURED THIS OUT IN THE *PAST*?
IF *DREAM* IS HOW *MAGIC* PLAYS IN REALITY...THEN THAT'S HOW I *TRAVEL* WHILE I SLEEP. I LIVE IN A SUBQUEST AND FOLLOW WHERE IT TAKES ME.
IT'S THE END OF SUMMER AND THE GOOGLE INTERNSHIP IS ALREADY OVER...WILL THEY HAVE HIRED BLUE-BECKY?

I FEEL LIKE I'M *CLOSE* TO IT. THE *SINGLE POINT*; THE *ONE CONCEPT* THAT WILL TIE THIS ALL TOGETHER.
"THE STARTING POINT, THE ONE FROM WHICH TO BEGIN BUILDING MY PARADIGM" IS WHAT THE PIXEL MEANT IN THE DREAM.
BACKUP (DOABLE?)
FIND THE CYPHER
CONTACT THE "BECKIES" E-MAIL?
IDEAS
TROUGH THE ARCHETYPE
FORMS POWER
INTELLIGENCES THEY GUIDE AND GOVERN!
SEEKING MEDIATION
ASTRAL INFLUENCES
PLACEMENT OF THE ELEMENTS
OPERATIONS (SPELLS?!)
ALGORITHMS MODELS
IMPLEMENTED IN
I CAN CHANGE THIS!
RUNNING CODE
WEIRD MACHINE
HUMAN INTERFACE
REPROGRAMMING REALITY!!
UX/UI INPUT
EXPLOIT (SPELLS?!)
sign all things intrusted to them with an Ideal Virtue; the Heavens and Stars, as instruments, disposing the matter in the mean while for the receiving of those forms which reside in Divine Majesty and to be conveyed by Stars; and the Giver of Forms distributes them by the Ministry of his Intelligences, which he hath set as Rulers and Controllers over his Works, to whom such a power is intrusted in things committed to them that so all Virtues of Stones, Herbs, Metals, and all other things may come from the Intelligences, the Governors. The Form, therefore, and Virtue of things comes first from the Ideas, then from the ruling and governing Intelligences, then from the aspects of the Heavens disposing, and lastly from the tempers of the Elements disposed, answering the influences of the Skies, by which the Elements themselves are ordered, or disposed. These kinds of operations, therefore, are performed in these inferior things by express forms, and in the Heavens by disposing virtues, in Intelligences by mediating rules, in the Original Cause by Ideas and exemplary forms, all of which must of necessity agree in the execution of the effect and virtue of everything. There is, therefore, a wonderful virtue and operation in every Herb and Stone, but greater in a Star, beyond which, even from the governing Intelligences every thing receiveth and obtains many things for itself, especially from the Supreme Cause, with whom all things do mutually and exactly correspond, agreeing in an harmonious
HY OF NATURAL MAGIC, BY HENRY CORNELIUS AGRIPPA
CHAPTER XIII
NCE THE OCCULT VIRTUES OF THINGS PROCEED
LTA PHILOSOPHIA.
Cap. XIII.
Weird machines, exploitability, and provable unexploitability
Thomas Dullien, Member, IEEE.
I MISS MY BOYS FROM *DEFCON* RIGHT NOW...SO MUCH.
COULD *THIS* REALLY BE HOW MY MAGIC EXPRESSES ITSELF? I HAVE TO... *HACK REALITY*?

GOOD, AUSTRI...YOU HAVE TO BE ***VERY CAREFUL*** ON THESE STEPS.
NO ONE KNOWS WHAT ***HAPPENS*** TO THOSE WHO FALL.
MAY WE ***ENTER?*** WHAT DO YOU SAY, PATRICK?
I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT LIKE A ***VISIT*** FROM AUSTRI...HE ***ALWAYS*** ASKS ABOUT YOU.
I HEARD FROM THE ***GOBLINS.*** THEY SAID YOU'VE STOPPED EATING AGAIN.

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG IT'S BEEN.
IT FEELS LIKE I'VE SLEPT FOR YEARS...BUT MY NAILS AREN'T GROWING, NEITHER IS MY BEARD.
TIME DOESN'T PASS HERE LIKE ON THE OUTSIDE. ARE YOU IN PAIN? DO YOU NEED ME TO HEAL YOU AGAIN?
NO... IT DOESN'T *HURT* LIKE AT THE START. EVERY TIME *HE* COMES UP THOSE STAIRS, IT'S JUST LIKE REPEATING THE SAME DREAM...
HE TALKS TO ME ABOUT *EVERYTHING* HE'S DOING, HE'S *ANGRY* HE CAN'T FIND *BECKY*, AND THEN...
OH, PATRICK...
I'VE ALWAYS *DREAMED* OF TOUCHING A UNICORN, OF SEEING *FAERIES*, OF ENTERING SOME *ENCHANTED* WORLD...
...BUT NOT LIKE *THIS*. I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN GO ON...
...I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN STILL *STAND* TO HAVE THAT *DREAM*.

UNGENEROUS, IMMORTAL AND IMMUTABLE... HERE I AM.
YOU'RE MY INSTRUMENT... YOU'RE MY BLACK MIRROR...*AND IN YOU I CAN SEE MYSELF.*
DO YOU WANT YOUR NAME TO BE OUROBOROS? A UNIVERSAL... ABSOLUTE ORGANISM THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN?
OR DO I INVOKE THE HYLE AND THE RAW MATERIAL? THE CENTER OF REPRESENTATION AND THE LIGHT OF THE GREAT SHOW?
NO! NO MATTER HOW MUCH I READ, I HAVE TO USE MY OWN LANGUAGE. THE ONE I REALLY KNOW AND LIVE WITH.
HERE, NOW, FOR ME...THAT'S THE *LANGUAGE* OF EVERY BIT OF CODE AND DATA THAT SURROUNDS US. THAT...THAT'S MY INTERFACE.
YES! THERE YOU ARE... ONE.
I FUCKING DID IT!

OCTOBER 29TH, TWO DAYS TO SAMHAIN.
HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED HOW I MANAGED TO MAKE A NAME FOR MYSELF AT GOOGLE AT JUST 21 YEARS OLD?
I'LL *TELL* YOU... I WORKED ON A *USER INTERFACE* PROJECT AT *COLUMBIA.*
IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN, BUT WHAT I DID...WHAT I *DO...* I MEAN, EVERY TIME I PUT A HUMAN AND A MACHINE IN CONNECTION... IT JUST WORKS.
EVERYTHING BECOMES SIMPLE AND CLEAR. IN AN INSTANT, I KNOW WHERE TO PUT MY HANDS. I GET AN IDEA...AND IT'S *ALWAYS* THE RIGHT ONE.
THAT'S WHY I WAS BROUGHT ONTO THE PROJECT. I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST LUCK, BUT NO...

...YOU WERE **ALREADY** PRACTICING MAGIC. YOU JUST DIDN'T KNOW IT.
EXACTLY! SPACE, MOVEMENT, NAVIGATION...IT CAN ALL BE EXPRESSED AS PART OF THE **SAME** SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE, A RAIN OF ONES AND ZEROS THAT'S LEGIBLE TO ANYONE. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY USES **METAPHORS**...
...AND SO DOES **MAGIC**. WITCHES ACT UPON REALITY BY WAY OF THE **LANGUAGE** WE USE TO DESCRIBE EVERYTHING THAT IS. THEIR **INTERFACE** IS **RITUALS AND TOOLS**.
I SUPPOSE IT IS **HEALTHY** THAT I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND A **WORD** YOU JUST SAID, MY DEAR.
I'VE **SEEN** ALL THAT YOU'VE ACCOMPLISHED THESE PAST FEW MONTHS, AND THAT'S ENOUGH TO KNOW YOU **WILL** BE ABLE TO SUMMON YOUR **FRIEND FER** TO SAFETY...AFTER ALL, YOU **ARE** BOTH TIED TOGETHER.
WITH THE **RIGHT** MAGIC, YOU CAN PULL HIM HERE FROM **ANY TIME AND PLACE**.
HERE, TAKE THIS...A **MAGIC OFFERING** TO HELP WITH YOUR SUMMONING RITUAL.
NO **NEED**, MC-B. BUT **THANKS ALL THE SAME**.
AT THIS POINT, I'M OUT OF **EXCUSES**. I JUST NEED TO GET TO **WORK**!

BEGIN INITIALIZATION SEQUENCE.
ZASH
RUMMBLE
FEAR DOIRICH!
WHAT?!
WHOOM
RUMMBLE
I INVOKE YOU.
CRACK

SKRAAK
GRRROOOWL
RUMMBLEEE

I *DID* IT! IT *WORKED!* HERE I THOUGHT I NEEDED TO LEARN *MAGIC FORMULAS*, LISTS OF *STRANGE HERBS* AND THE NAME OF *EVERY ENCHANTED CREATURE* IMAGINABLE...
...BUT I JUST HAD TO CREATE MY *OWN* MAGIC ALL ALONG. IT'S ABSURD, IT'S MIND-BENDING, AND IT'S COMPLETELY IMPERFECT, SO MUCH STILL TO *TEST* ABOUT IT...BUT IT *REALLY WORKS.*
...HEY, BEAST.

Chapter 9

IT IS IN THE MOST *UNEXPECTED* OF DEFEATS...
...THAT MY *REVENGE* WILL TAKE ROOT, WITCH.
FER DOIRICH HAS ESCAPED CAPTIVITY! NO... HE'S BEEN *STOLEN* FROM US!

HE WAS *HELD* UNDER *THREE DISTINCT RESTRAINING CIRCLES,* KEPT SUSPENDED IN THE AIR TO *BLUNT* HIS POWERS OF TRANSFORMATION.
I FORCED HIM INTO A *CONTINUOUS NIGHTMARE STATE,* NOURISHED ONLY BY LIES AND DECEPTION...HE WAS *MINE!*
THERE IS *NO WAY* THAT *WITCH* OF HIS COULD'VE SUMMONED HIM *UNAIDED.*
THIS *MEANS,* MY KING... THAT YOU HAVE A *TRAITOR* IN YOUR COURT.
MMM...
I AM *SO TIRED* OF GETTING *BAD NEWS.*

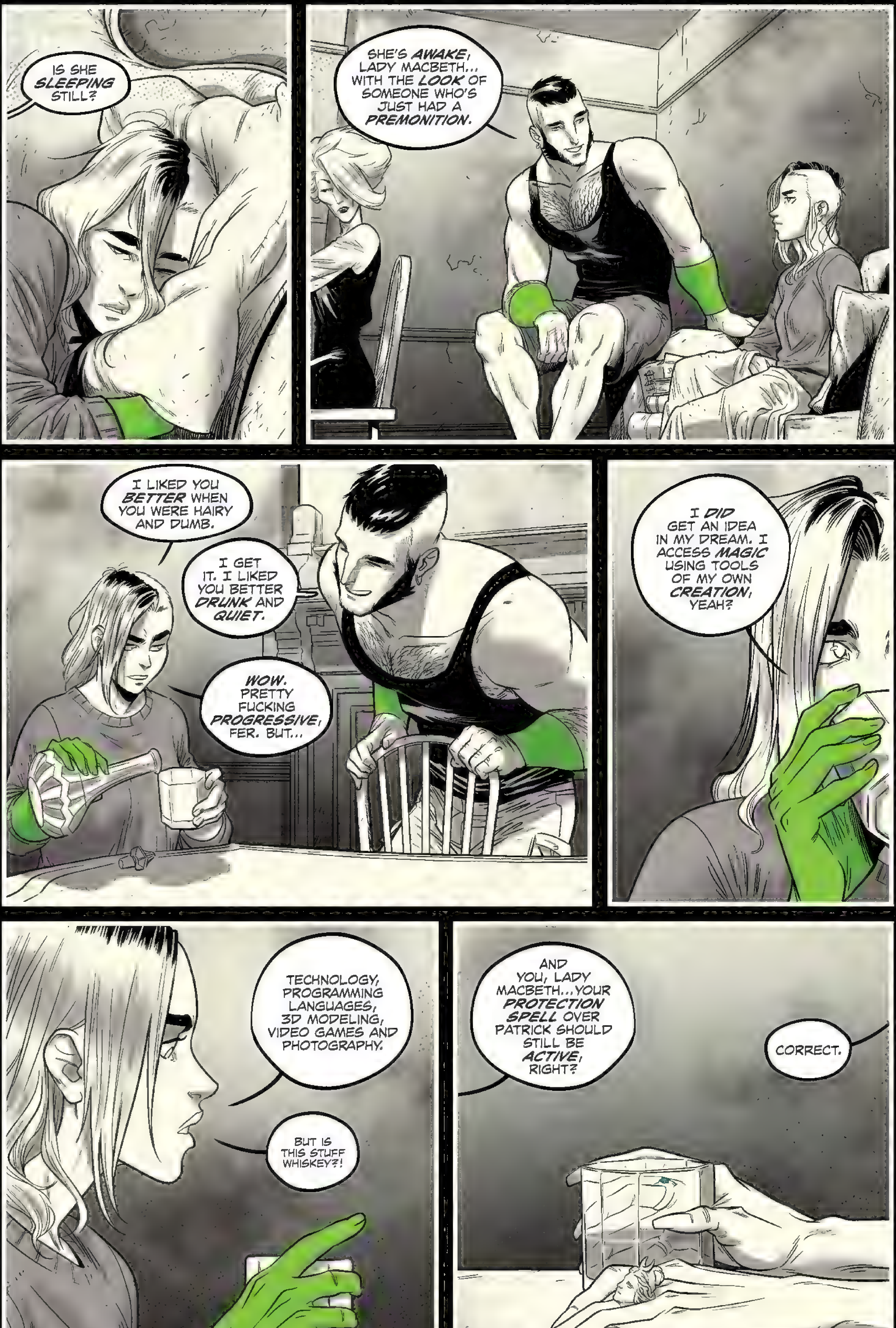
FIRST ONCHU, THEN ARACH...
...THEN ALL MY HUNTERS.
I'VE GROWN SO SICK OF CONSTANT DISAPPOINTMENT.
I HOPED THAT ONE AS POWERFUL AS YOU WOULD NEVER LEAVE ME SO SIMILARLY...
...DISAPPOINTED.
AGH! MY KING...
EXACTLY. I AM YOUR KING.
AND YOU ENTERED MY PLAYROOM...
...SO I MUST ASSUME YOU WISH TO PLAY.
SO COME ON THEN...LET US GIVE YOUNG PATRICK HERE A SHOW HE WON'T SOON FORGET.

I *READ* YOUR STORY, AND, WELL... THIS IS *NOT* HOW IT MADE YOU OUT TO LOOK.
I AM *ALWAYS* DIFFERENT, AS *VARIED* AS A STORY HAS *TELLINGS.*
I THINK I LIKE YOU BETTER *THIS* WAY.
MONSTROUS?
AUTHENTIC, YOU BIG, HORNY IDIOT.
I CAN SEE A DIFFERENT TYPE OF *MAGIC* IN EACH ONE OF YOUR EYES...I *STUDIED* THEM ALL, YOU KNOW?
A LOT'S CHANGED...I CREATED A *CODE,* AN *INTERFACE* THAT LETS ME CAST *SPELLS.*
THAT'S HOW I *SUMMONED* YOU HERE, THAT...AND OUR *BOND.*
AND BY THE WAY, I'M SORRY ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED ON THE *ROOF.* I FEEL SO *STUPID...*
I DIDN'T WANT THINGS TO GO *THAT WAY.*
I WAS JUST...I WAS *PISSED OFF...* I'M SORRY...

YOU'RE A ***WITCH.*** WE ***KNEW*** WHAT WE WERE GETTING INTO WHEN WE ASKED YOU TO JOIN US. EVERYTHING YOU'VE DONE... IS ***WELL*** WITHIN YOUR NATURE.
NATURE IS SOMETHING YOU SHOULD BE ***WARY*** OF, REBECCA. ***MINE*** IS TO BETRAY... AND I ***WILL*** DO IT. I ***WILL*** BETRAY YOU, IN TIME...OR ***DIE*** TRYING.
THEN, THEN...I ***ORDER*** YOU NOT TO. I ***ORDER YOU!***
I FORBID YOU TO BETRAY ME, FEAR DOIRICH!
MY HEART ***BREAKS*** TO INTERRUPT YOU TWO... BUT I HAVE RECEIVED A ***MESSAGE.***
WORD HAS ***PASSED*** TO US THAT IN ***TWO DAYS...*** KING TARANIS PLANS TO PERFORM A ***GREAT RITUAL.***
IT IS TO BE PERFORMED DURING THE ***GRAND FAIRY BALL*** IN HONOR OF ***SAMHAIN...*** A RITUAL FUELED BY ***THE HEARTS OF WITCHES.***
WE ***MUST*** FORM A PLAN. BUT FIRST...THE DRUID MUST FIND A FORM LESS ***CONSPICUOUS.*** I'LL FIND AN ***OBSCENE CRYSTAL*** FOR HIM.

WE *NEED* TO GET INTO THAT CASTLE... THEY'VE GOT *PATRICK* IN THERE.
THERE'S *NO TIME* TO SECOND GUESS MYSELF...NOT AFTER ALL I'VE DONE.
NOT AFTER I'VE *JUST* FOUND THE POWER HIDING INSIDE MYSELF...
BUT THE TRADITIONS OF MY ANCESTORS DON'T BELONG TO ME. THEIR DIVINATION IS USELESS.
ONLY THE *DREAM* IS MINE. EVERY TIME, IT LASTS LESS THAN A SECOND, BUT IN THAT TIME...I'M *FREE*.
I'M A *WITCH*. I CAN *CHOOSE* MY SYMBOLS, *WIELD* THEM, AND WITH THAT POWER...HOLD *AGENCY* OVER THE LAWS OF THE MORTAL WORLD.
SO ANSWER ME, ORACLE, TELL ME... HOW DO I SAVE PATRICK?

...FIRST THE PAST, THEN THE PRESENT, AND THIRD THE FUTURE. IT FOLLOWS THE OBSTACLE AND FINALLY THE MEANS.
THE BAIT. YOUR BROTHER HAS BEEN SEIZED TO LURE YOU.
THE WAIT. THE RESCUE WILL HAVE TO FOLLOW THE RESOLUTION OF MUCH MORE SERIOUS MATTERS.
THE REBIRTH. IMPLIES A DEATH, A BEGINNING, A TRANSFORMATION AND...
...INTERESTINGLY, THE KING IS NOT YOUR OBSTACLE, BUT YOUR OWN BROTHER.
HE'S NOT MY BROTHER.
IT DOES NOT MATTER. THE MEANS BY WHICH YOU WILL SAVE HIM AND YOUR ARSENAL...
...ARE ALREADY IN YOUR HANDS.
LURE
F U T U R E
WAITING
REBIRTH
BROTHER
ARSENAL
SO ABOVE, AS BELOW.
SO IN THE DREAM, AS IN THE WAKING WORLD.


IS SHE *SLEEPING* STILL?
SHE'S *AWAKE*, LADY MACBETH... WITH THE *LOOK* OF SOMEONE WHO'S JUST HAD A *PREMONITION*.
I LIKED YOU *BETTER* WHEN YOU WERE HAIRY AND DUMB.
I GET IT. I LIKED YOU BETTER *DRUNK* AND *QUIET*.
WOW. PRETTY FUCKING *PROGRESSIVE*, FER. BUT...
I *DID* GET AN IDEA IN MY DREAM. I ACCESS *MAGIC* USING TOOLS OF MY OWN *CREATION*, YEAH?
TECHNOLOGY, PROGRAMMING LANGUAGES, 3D MODELING, VIDEO GAMES AND PHOTOGRAPHY.
BUT IS THIS STUFF WHISKEY?!
AND YOU, LADY MACBETH... YOUR *PROTECTION SPELL* OVER PATRICK SHOULD STILL BE *ACTIVE*, RIGHT?
CORRECT.

THAT MEANS WE'VE GOT A SIGNAL CONNECTING YOU TO HIM...
...AND FROM HIM IT RETURNS TO YOU.
SO IF I TAKE YOU, AND HOOK YOU UP TO SOME TYPE OF SYSTEM TO TRACE THAT SIGNAL...
LOATHE AS I AM TO ASK... JUST WHAT WOULD THIS "SYSTEM" OF YOURS ENTAIL?
WHY, MILADY... I'LL BE HOOKING YOU UP TO GOOGLE MAPS.
AFTER THAT, IF MY MAGIC CAN SYNCH WITH THE APP... I THINK I CAN GET US INTO TARANIS'S CASTLE.
GOOD IDEA.
THE LAST TIME YOU HAD ONE OF THOSE, YOU JUMPED OFF THE SIDE OF A BUILDING.
PLEASE BECOME FURRY AND STUPID AGAIN, SMARTASS.
YOU CAN TAKE THE CRYSTAL OFF ME WHENEVER YOU WANT... I'M NOT EVEN WEARING PANTIES UNDER THIS GLAMOUR.
ENOUGH OF THAT. WE ONLY HAVE ONE CHANCE, IN TWO DAYS...
...SO LET'S GET TO WORK.

OCTOBER 31, SAMHAIN.
COME, THICK NIGHT, AND WRAP YOURSELF IN THE HEAVIEST SMOKE OF HELL, BECAUSE THE HOUR OF A SUBLIME REVENGE IS APPROACHING...
SO... LET ME RECAP. THE *SMARTWATCH* IS PROJECTING ILLUSIONARY COSTUMES ON US.
BUT IT ONLY *WORKS* IF YOU'RE IN RANGE OF THE *DRONE* THAT WILL BE TRACKING YOU *VISUALLY* THROUGHOUT THIS THING.
THE SMARTWATCH AND THE DRONE FORM THE TWO POLES OF THIS *SPELL*. YOU'RE THE WORLD *BETWEEN* THE POLES... AND IN THAT WORLD, YOU'RE MADE UP OF *INFORMATION*. GET IT?
I'M A *DUMB BEAST* WHO LOOKS LIKE A *PORN STAR* THANKS TO A DWARVEN CRYSTAL, AND THANKS TO THIS...*INTELLIGENT WATCH* OF YOURS, THAT ALL SEEMS PRACTICALLY *MUNDANE*.
I AM TRYING TO "GET" "IT," BUT JUST *WHAT* TYPE OF CREATURE, EXACTLY...IS YOUR WATCH MAKING US LOOK LIKE? A KNIGHT? A LADY? A *LADY KNIGHT*? A DONKEY, WREATHED IN *FLOWERS*?
A DUMB, *HAIRY,* BEAST. GET IT RIGHT.
IT'S CHANGING OUR *SKINS* CONSTANTLY, LIKE A SCREENSAVER. NO ONE SEES THE *SAME THING* TWICE WHEN THEY LOOK AT US. THE ONLY REASON WE *RECOGNIZE* OURSELVES IS BECAUSE WE'RE *HOLDING* THE DEVICES.

THAT SAID... IS IT *NORMAL* FOR THE SUBWAY TO BE GETTING MORE AND MORE SATURATED WITH *MAGIC* LIKE THIS?
I DON'T KNOW, ONLY *YOU* SEE THE MAGIC THE WAY YOU DO. IT IS *DIFFERENT* FOR ALL OF US.
IN ANY CASE, WHEN WE *REACH* THE PALACE, WE'LL FIND *ALLIES* WAITING TO SUPPORT US.
THIS IS AN *OFFENSIVE* LONG BUILDING. OUR *ALLIES* WITHIN CONFIRM KING TARANIS HAS *MOVED* HIS *HEART CAGES.*
IF THEY *DO* USE YOURS FOR A RITUAL, BECKY...YOU *KNOW* WHAT WILL HAPPEN, RIGHT?
I KNOW. SEE YOU ON THE OTHER SIDE.
THE *RITUAL* MUST BE SABOTAGED IN EVERY WAY, FROM ALL SIDES. WE WILL *SAVE* YOUR PATRICK...THEN *ESCAPE* AS TARANIS'S POWER CRUMBLES.
I'VE HIDDEN *PORTALS* ACROSS CENTRAL PARK...THERE WILL BE *MANY* POINTS OF *SAFE ESCAPE.*
Subway

WE KNOW VERY LITTLE OF THE RITUAL *ITSELF*... ONLY THAT TARANIS INTENDS TO USE THE *ART OF NAMES*. AND HE WHO CONTROLS *NAMES* CONTROLS THE VERY ESSENCE OF THINGS.
EXACTLY. BUT LET'S NOT *WASTE TIME*, THE *FIRST* PRIORITY IS...
NOMEN OMEN.
PATRICK. PRIORITY NUMBER ONE IS PATRICK.
YES. I'VE *BEGUN* THE MASKING PROCEDURE.
TO GET TO PATRICK, WE MUST *FIRST* FREE ARACH...ONCE ONE OF TARANIS'S MOST TRUSTED ALLIES, AND *OUR* CHIEF SPY. SHE WILL *KNOW* WHERE THE BOY IS BEING HELD.
I'LL TAKE CARE OF IT.
WHILE *I* FOCUS ON THE RITUAL AND ITS OFFICIANTS. WITH *THESE ELEMENTS* SET ASUNDER, TARANIS WILL NEED *MONTHS* OR EVEN *YEARS* TO AGAIN ASSEMBLE THE RITUAL.
GOOD. YOU *DO* THAT, LADY MACBETH...WHILE *I TAKE BACK MY HEART*.
IT IS *UNDERSTANDABLE* THAT YOU'D CRAVE THAT SO *ARDENTLY*, BUT--
NO. I'M DOING THIS. I'M *TIRED* OF FEELING MY EVERY EMOTION LIKE IT BELONGS TO *SOMEONE ELSE*.
IF I'M *REALLY* GOING TO DIE...YOU CAN *DAMN WELL* BET IT'S GOING TO BE WITH MY *HEART* BACK IN MY CHEST.

BUT *WAIT*, WHAT--
THAT'S NOT A CHILD... THAT'S MY... A...
OH *GOD*, I--SUDDENLY I'M...NOT *FEELING* SO GOOD...
DO--DO YOU *SEE* IT?
SEE *WHAT?*
IT'S...IT'S *NOTHING*. I *THINK*.
IT JUST... IT FEELS LIKE THEY'RE *WAITING* FOR US. LIKE THIS WHOLE *PARTY* TARANIS IS THROWING IS A *FARCE*, A *MOVIE* I ALREADY KNOW THE *END* TO.
LET ME *TELL* YOU ABOUT THESE... *MOVIES*.
ALL WHO WATCH THEM INTERPRET WHAT THEY SEE DIFFERENTLY. ALL TAKE A DIFFERENT MEANING FROM THE SAME STORY...
DO *NOT* BELIEVE YOU KNOW WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN, USE WHAT YOU *KNOW* TO *MAKE* WHAT YOU *WANT* TO HAVE HAPPEN... COME TO PASS.

I KNOW IT SOUNDS *CRAZY* TO SAY IT, AFTER *EVERYTHING* WE'VE SEEN, BUT...
...*WOW.*
ARE WE STILL IN CENTRAL PARK?
I HAVEN'T SEEN SO MANY STORIES IN THE SAME PLACE SINCE...
...ARCADIA.
YEAH.
I'VE ALREADY SEEN *AT LEAST* ONE PRINCESS...
GUESTS FROM ALL STATES HAVE ARRIVED!

A TOAST! TO *ALL* THE WORLD HOLDS *UNNATURAL!*
CAN YOU IMAGINE?! *HAHAHA!*
THIS *MUSIC*... IT'S MAKING MY *HEAD* SPIN.
THERE'S *MAGIC* IN THESE DRINKS... *STRONGER* THAN USUAL, DON'T YOU THINK?
WHO EVEN *INVITED* YOU?
SELFIEEE!

MC-B... *OFFICIANTS.* FER...PATRICK. I'LL SEE YOU *BOTH* AT THE PORTALS ON THE *LAKE* AT *MIDNIGHT*, DURING THE *TOAST*.
LET'S GET *MOVING*... AND IF *ANY* OF US FINISH EARLY, GET IN *CONTACT*. USE YOUR *SMARTWATCH*.
SURELY A *MAGIC* MESSAGE IS *PREFERABLE*.
YOU MEAN *OBVIOUS* AND *TRACEABLE*. YOU'VE GOT THE SMARTWATCHES. DON'T *WASTE* THEM.
THEN WE BEST NOT *LINGER* A SECOND LONGER...*TAKE ADVANTAGE OF WHAT YOU KNOW*, AS WILL WE *ALL*.
MC-B... *THANK YOU*.
THE SWEETEST THANKS ARE THE INAUDIBLE ONES, MY DEAR. BELIEVE ME WHEN I TELL YOU THAT YOU DESERVE THEM MORE THAN I ACTUALLY DESERVE THEM.
NOW... *EXCUSE ME*.

WAS... SHE JUST *NICE*?
IN HER WAY.
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
IT'S A *DANCE*, BECKY... SO LET'S *DANCE*.
FER! WE DON'T EVEN KNOW *WHAT* ILLUSION PEOPLE ARE SEEING RIGHT NOW! WE COULD LOOK LIKE *ANYONE* DANCING TOGETHER!
I HOPE THEY SEE AN OLD LADY DANCING WITH AN ARMORED POSSUM.
AS LONG AS I GET TO BE THE POSSUM.
WHY NOT? YOU ALREADY LOOK *SIMILAR ENOUGH*.
HA! DON'T *JOKE*! THIS IS A *DEADLY MISSION*!
THEN THERE'S NO BETTER TIME TO *LAUGH*. ESPECIALLY BECAUSE... YOU NEED TO *GO*, BECKY.
IF YOU'RE *CAUGHT*... CALL ME.
BYE FOR NOW, BEAST.

OKAY, BECKY. YOU'RE ON YOUR *OWN*. IT'S JUST *YOU* AND...
...HIM?
THIS PARTY IS *INCREDIBLE*! WAS THAT THE *PRINCESS OF VENICE* OVER THERE?
I HAVEN'T SEEN A PARTY LIKE THIS IN A *HUNDRED YEARS!*
LOOK! THAT'S THE *REGENT* OF *DEATH VALLEY*! AND THE *DUKE OF BALTIMORE*!
GOOD GODS! THAT'S THE LADY OF THE GOLDEN GATE!
SAVE YOUR *AMAZEMENT*, LADIES. AT *MIDNIGHT*... I PROMISE SOMETHING *TRULY* UNFORGETTABLE.
AND *NOW*... LET US *TOAST* THE *TURNING* OF THE *WHEEL OF THE YEAR*...
...AS THE *OLD WORLD* IS LEFT *DEAD IN THE PAST!*

OF *ALL* THE PLACES YOU COULD'VE BEEN KEPT, ARACH...IT JUST *HAD* TO BE THE GREENHOUSE.
YOU MUST'VE *REALLY* PISSED OFF KING TARANIS, YOU OLD *SPIDER.*
IF I WERE STILL THE *GUARDIAN* OF CENTRAL PARK, I COULD BE OUT THERE *CELEBRATING* WITH *EVERYONE ELSE...*
SHIT, LET'S BE HONEST...I'D *ALREADY* BE DRUNK.

BUT *NO.* NOW...
...ENOUGH OF *"IF."*
ENOUGH TALK.
BWHOOM
WITCH... THY WILL BE DONE.

Chapter 10

THE GREENHOUSE, A PLACE OF CAPTIVITY.
ADON, I FEEL SOMETHING... IN THE EARTH.
THE SLEEPERS USUALLY REST IN BODIES OF WATER...
...BUT I TOO FEEL A TREACHEROUS SHADOW RISING.
CRAACK
GO. CALL THE OTHER GUARDIANS.
SKRAAAAAK
I.
DON'T.
THINK SO.

HERE YOU ARE...YOU GROTESQUE COPY OF SIEGFRIED.
CRA CRACK
I AM NOT YOUR ENEMY, FER DOIRICH... I'M STILL LOYAL TO THE QUEEN MAEVE!
YES...AND I BETRAYED HER ALMOST TWENTY YEARS AGO.
I KNOW A DOUBLE AGENT WHEN I SEE ONE!
SKRAM!
SLEEP NOW, ADON... AND WE'LL SEE IF YOU'RE STILL WHAT YOU ONCE WERE.

AND NOW... THE *WORST* PART.
WHY MUST THESE SPELLS ALWAYS BE THE SAME?
LET'S GET THIS *OVER* WITH, ARACH...I *KNOW* YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BE *HAPPY* ABOUT IT.
MMM?!
YOU BASTARD! I'LL FEED PIECES OF YOU TO MY CHILDREN!
AGH! GOOD MORNING TO YOU TOO, ARACH.

YOU?! OF EVERYONE LADY MACBETH COULD SEND?
GROW UP! YOU KNOW HOW THE SPELL WORKS!
SHUT UP AND FUCK OFF, FER!
YOU KNOW THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS... NOT FOR OUR PEOPLE.
I SAVED YOUR LIFE... NOW YOU OWE ME ONE.
NO MATTER WHAT OATHS YOU HAVE PENDING WITH THE KING...
...YOU OWE ME A LIFE. WHICH MEANS YOU OWE IT TO MY WITCH.
I SEE WHAT YOU'RE DOING. YOU WANT TO BIND ME TO YOUR MISTRESS.
SEE IT. TAKE IT. OR LEAVE IT. YOU CAN SWEAR AN OATH TO ME AND ESCAPE... OR STAY HERE TO BE TORTURED AS LONG AS THAT VIDEO REMAINS ONLINE.
AGAIN... FUCK YOU. I'M ONLY DOING THIS BECAUSE I'M WORTHLESS TO HIM, BUT...
I SWEAR IT ON THE DREAM, ON THE BLOOD AND ON MY REAL NAME.
NGH! IT HURTS.
LOSING YOUR FREEDOM ALWAYS HURTS. NOW... LET'S GET MOVING.
FSSSH
FSSSH

THESE CORRIDORS ARE **ENDLESS...** ARE YOU **SURE** YOU CAN **HEAR** ME?
LOUD AND CLEAR, LADY MC-B... THE **KING'S** STILL WORKING HIS SHOW OUT HERE.
FER'S JUST WRITTEN THAT HE'S RETRIEVED **ARACH,** AND THEY'RE HEADING FOR PATRICK.
AN EXEMPLARY SAVIOR...
TO THINK... **THE GUARDIAN OF CENTRAL PARK,** BATHED IN THE MILK OF **HUMAN KINDNESS...** IS IT EVEN **HEALTHY?**
RELAX, I KNOW HE'S A BAD GUY.
YOU'VE ONLY TAKEN IT FOR GRANTED THAT **I'M** GOOD, AFTER ALL.
A **FAIR ANSWER.** FOR **MY** PART... I'VE **REACHED** THE DESIRED LOCATION.
AND?
NO **OFFICIANTS,** BUT PLENTY OF **MAGIC.** I MUST FIND THE **SOURCE.**
GOOD LUCK, MC-B.
I DON'T NEED LUCK...

...IT'S OUT OF THE WARP OF FATE THAT THE FATEFUL SISTERS DANCE.
I FEEL THE HEAT OF MANY FIRES MIXED TOGETHER.
I HEAR A CONCERT OF BEATS, WHICH THUNDER TOGETHER IN BRIGHT VITALITY.
...THE *MUSEUM?*
IT'S WORSE THAN WHAT I THOUGHT...
THE EMERALD CLOUDS WILL BE FREED. TEMPLES WILL FALL DESECRATED AND DEMOLISHED, THE SEAS WILL REBEL PLUNGING THE MEMORY OF THE CITY THAT WAS INTO THE ABYSS.

YOU'RE SAYING...JUST *TOUCHING* ONE OF THOSE PAINTINGS COULD *KILL* ME?
THEY'D *STRETCH* YOUR FLESH FROM ONE SIDE OF THE WORLD TO THE OTHER...GOOD THING I KNOW THE *WAY.*
TARANIS IS *PARANOID.* DEVERA IS *EVEN WORSE.* BUT I'M A SPIDER... NOBODY *NOTICES* ME. I *ALREADY* HAVE WHAT I WANT. AND KNOW WHAT I NEED.
THE *HUMAN...* HE IS *IN HERE.*
I SMELL THE *BLOOD...* HE MUST'VE BEEN *TORTURED TOO.*
WHAT...THE *FUCK?*
FZZZ
HEAR HEAR... IS THAT THE VOICE OF MY *GUARDIAN?* COULD IT *BE?*
OH SHIT.
FZZZ
FZZZ

THE OFFICIANTS...
THE NAMES...
THE SACRIFICES...
...THE FIRE.
...IS THIS THE *RITUAL?*
THE HEARTS OF THE WITCHES ARE ALL HERE.
REBECCA MUST KNOW NOW BEFORE...
YOU'RE AS BEAUTIFUL AS EVER.
...CENTURIES HAVE PASSED, BUT I REMEMBER *EVERY MOMENT* I SPENT WITH YOU.
THE *IRONY* CAN'T BE *LOST* ON YOU. THIS TIME, *I'M* THE ONE WITH THE *RIGHT BOOK* IN MY HANDS...NOT *YOU.*
macbeth

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO HAVE THE ROLES REVERSED?
THAT COPY...
YOU REALLY COULD USE SOME REST, MY BELOVED.
WOOOSH
CURSED BE YOU NOW AND FOREVER, MEDEA!
YOUR IMPIETY TOWARDS HISTORY WILL DRAG YOU...
INTO THE OBLIVION YOU DESERVE!
MAY THIS BE YOUR LAST CURSE, LADY MACBETH.
THUP
AND NOW, IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME...ALL THAT'S LEFT FOR YOU BETWEEN THOSE PAGES IS A FINAL MONOLOGUE AND A TRAGIC END.

THE THRESHOLD...
...IT WAS A TRAP.
OF COURSE ARACH COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN, BUT HERE, SHE'S ALREADY VANISHED FROM SIGHT. SHE WILL BE DEALT WITH...SOON ENOUGH.
COME ON... IT'S NOT ME YOU WANT. I COULD STILL TAKE YOU TO MY MISTRESS, RIGHT?
I KNOW THESE GAMES WELL, GUARDIAN. I'D NEVER TRUST YOU... ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE FULL OF WITCH MAGIC.
...YOU KNOW I WON'T BE FAITHFUL TO HER FOREVER.
AS IT HAS BEEN WITH ME.
SOMETHING OF A HABIT FOR THOSE CLOSEST TO YOU.
PERHAPS YOU'RE RIGHT. THAT WOULD BE A PROBLEM...ONE TO BE SOLVED NOW, ONCE...AND FOR ALL.

I KNOW YOUR KIND. I'VE SEEN YOU THERE, GROVELING ON YOUR KNEES IN THE DIRT...BENT LOW, OVERWHELMED... DEFEATED.
YOUR KIND ALWAYS FINDS THEMSELVES THERE...BECAUSE OF THE STORY. GOOD ALWAYS TRIUMPHS IN THE END.
THAT IS A CONSTANT.
SO I DECIDED TO CHANGE WHAT I COULD. EVERYTHING AROUND IT, EVERYTHING ORBITING THE CONSTANT.
MY SUBJECTS, THIS CITY...
...AND THE WHOLE WORLD.
AND I WILL CHANGE IT ALL, FER DOIRICH. TO SAVE OUR DREAM, OUR PEOPLE...I WILL CHANGE MOST OF ALL. I MUST.
I MUST BECOME WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS...
...A HERO.

OKAY, I'LL *PANIC* IF YOU DON'T ANSWER ME. SO I'LL JUST LEAVE YOU THIS *VOICE NOTE*... BUT YOU *BETTER* CALL BACK IMMEDIATELY.
THE CAGES WERE A *TRAP*, I DIDN'T SEE A OUNCE OF MAGIC INSIDE THEM... HE JUST WANTED TO LURE ME CLOSE TO THE THRONE.
WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?
I'VE GOT A *FEW* BACKUP PLANS, WITCH STUFF MOSTLY... BUT IT'S ALMOST *MIDNIGHT*. THERE'S NOT MUCH TIME LEFT.
FER? BUT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR *DISGUISE?*
THEY'LL *SEE* YOU!
IT'S *FINE*, REBECCA. LET THEM. I ALREADY *SAVED* PATRICK. MAYBE *TRUST* YOUR FAITHFUL SERVANT FOR ONCE.
ARE YOU *JOKING?* PATRICK'S *SAFE?*
THEN-- THEN WE HAVE TO *GO!* FIND LADY MACBETH, GET *MY HEART*, AND *LEAVE!*
FHUP

COME ON... THERE'S *ALWAYS* TIME FOR *ONE LAST DANCE.*
AREN'T *WITCHES* SUPPOSED TO DANCE *NAKED* AROUND *FIRES?*
CUT THE *HORNY BULLSHIT,* FER... THE *KING* STILL HAS MY HEART!
QUIET, GIRL... YOUR *HEART* IS EXACTLY WHERE IT *SHOULD* BE.
RIGHT HERE...

DONG
...ON THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE.

AH AH AH AH
DONG
N-NO...
YOU SHOULD SEE YOURSELF RIGHT NOW. WONDERFUL!
THAT'S RIGHT, REBECCA... FER HAS LEFT THE SCENE. ALL THANKS TO YOU!
YOU WHO BROUGHT HIM HERE, YOU WHO SET HIM AGAINST ME. IN SHORT, YOU...WHO SACRIFICED HIS LIFE...JUST TO GET YOUR PUNY PATRICK BACK.
HE COULD'VE CHOSEN LIFE, CHOSEN TO BETRAY YOU...THE PAIN OF RESISTANCE BROKE HIM, LITERALLY.
BUT HUSH NOW. AT THE SOUND OF THE TWELFTH CHIME...YOUR TIME WILL HAVE COME.
DONG
YES. TELL ME, WITCH GIRL... JUST WHAT AM I?
YOU... YOU ARE...

YOU'RE DEAD!

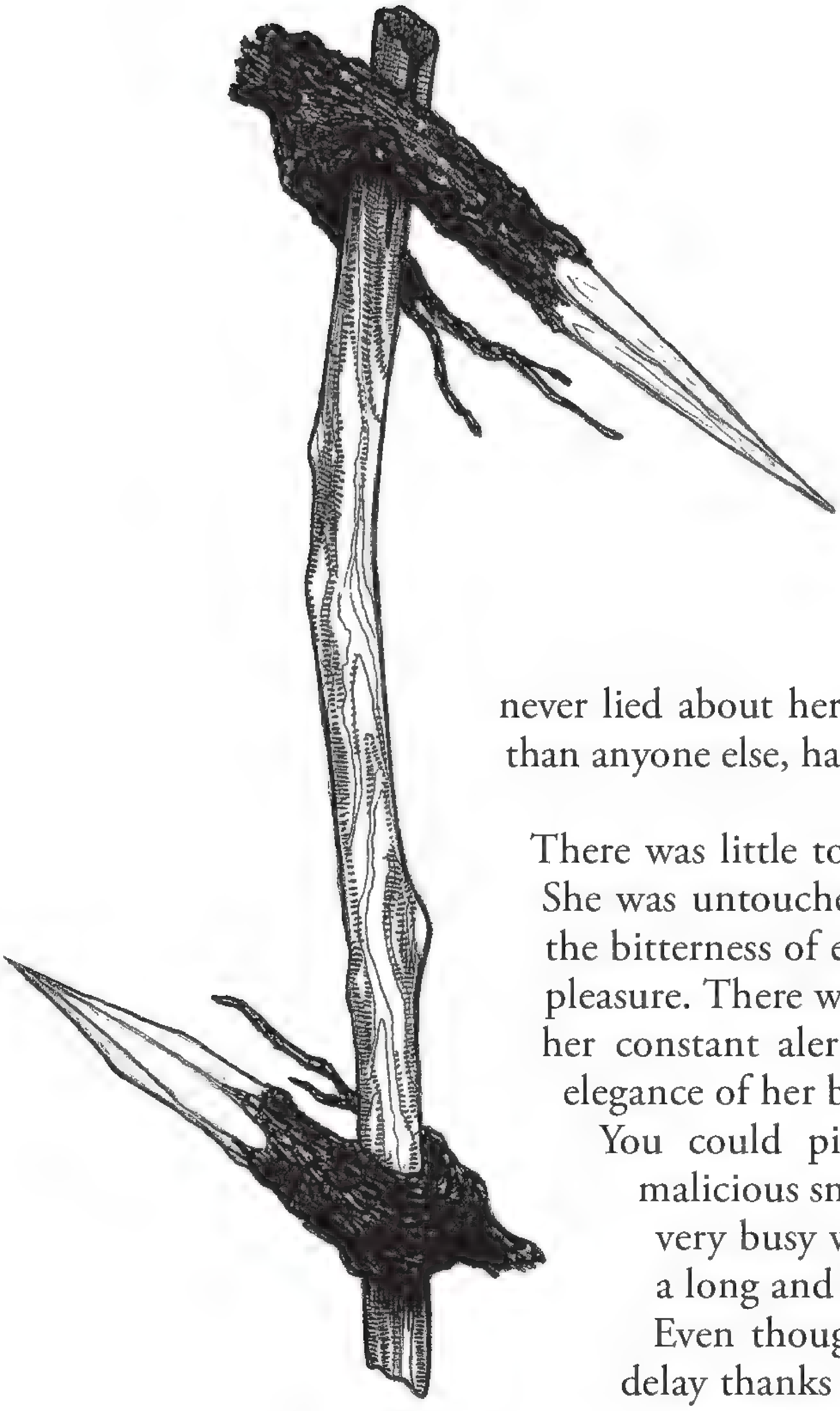
DONG
WOOOSH
RUMMMBLEE
WOOOSH
CRA?
DONG
RUMMMMBLEE
DONG

DONG
Y-YOU... NO LONGER HAVE... TIME...
DONG
I HAVE ALL THE TIME I NEED...
DONG
MY WILL IS NOW AS STRONG AS YOURS...
I'M NO LONGER THE GIRL YOU SLAMMED AGAINST THE WALL IN THAT BATHROOM.
YOU'VE NO POWER OVER ME...

...BECAUSE I AM THE POWER.
I AM MAGIC.
DONG
DONG

editor's note: the events of this short story take place before NOMEN OMEN #1.

MEDEA



"A man's name is not like a
mantle which merely hangs about
him, and which one perchance
may safely twitch and pull,
but a perfectly fitting garment,
which, like the skin, has grown
over and over him, at which one
cannot rake and scrape without
injuring the man himself."

That's what Goethe said. And that's what Medea thought as well. She had never lied about her name, her face, her identity. She, more than anyone else, had to be true.

There was little to nothing that could upset her, after all. She was untouched by the ravages of time, unscathed by the bitterness of exhaustion. She slept rarely, and only for pleasure. There was no room for rest in her story. Indeed, her constant alertness, her resilience belied the striking elegance of her body.

You could picture her leaning somewhere, with a malicious smile on her lips. And even then, she was a very busy woman, and that same smile would hide a long and frantic schedule.

Even though her flight had endured a horrendous delay thanks to a blizzard, Medea strode through the crowd in the airport followed by whispers of wonder and excitement. Her skin was pale, maybe too pale, but it was cool. Her eyes were barely highlighted by black lines, her lips vividly sharpened by a strong red. The same color, that of a newly discovered coral, decorated her hair, black as a raven's wing. Medea nonchalantly displayed the much-desired cascade of wavy curls a fifties pin-up would kill for.

As she strode through JFK, fantasies of every kind swirled around her. She was mistaken for the protagonist of a new commercial, or for some famous actress. Everybody turned around to notice, again and again, as if she couldn't be real. And yet she was real, down to the core, unlike so many others who hid their true faces behind the crystal's power. She appeared as she truly was, just as Jason and the Argonauts had seen her in Colchis. Nothing had changed since then. Even her hair was still the same. Indeed, bystanders couldn't help but notice how short her skirt was under the large black coat, and how her white thighs were highlighted by a rim of dark lace of her expensive stockings.

Next to her, a boy was idly dragging his luggage. Instead of looking where he was going, he was watching a video on his phone, barely free of airplane mode.
- 7:00 local time: Flights at New York's JFK are now operational again, after yesterday's cancellations due to extreme winds and freezing temperatures.

He was much younger than her partner. He looked skinny, even famished. His hair was very short and had taken an odd shape after the intercontinental flight. In his black clothes, he looked even thinner. Two huge gauges pierced his ears. A tangle of wild amaranth hung from one of them. Maybe that was his only remarkable trait, as for the rest, Owain was rather difficult to notice. As with so many others like him, he was pleasant in spite of his shabbiness, but nothing more. That morning he was just one of countless exhausted travelers.

- Although flights are now resuming at LaGuardia airport, we recommend passengers to get in touch with their flight provider to obtain detailed information about their travel before leaving for the airport.

Owain's sleepy eyes took in the outer world beyond the airport's viewports. He could barely see the pale light of the dawning sun, and the thin layer of snow hiding everything else. He snorted and dragged his suitcase. After the storm, New York City was drowned in light and he needed water. A lot of water.

- According the Flight Aware website, about 5.000 flights have been canceled in the US because of extreme weather, more than 2/3 of those in the Boston and New York airports. Meanwhile, thousands of upcoming flights have been suspended and schools have been closed in many towns. The whole northeast area is now subject to heavy snowfall.

Medea searched for something in her large, soft Hermès handbag.
- Are they checking our documents again? I can't remember how many times they do it before letting us out.

She took one, two, then four small ancient flasks, clutching her fingers around them. The items would have never passed a security check without a magic ward.

Owain stopped his video, pushing his thumb on the weather forecast lady's face.
- Don't worry, I've got them. Anyway, we're almost out of here. We don't need them anymore. I've already got a message from the driver: he's waiting for us.

Medea chose a flask filled with colored water and stored the others safely away. There were no labels, but their contents were easily recognizable. They looked as if they had been taken from a dusty beauty case belonging to an actress from the Twenties.
- Very well, here it is. You look terrible, Owain. Do something.

- Well, of course. We've been traveling for more than twenty hours…

- Precisely. Use it. I can't bear to see you like this.

The boy took the vial as the two of them stopped in the grand hall of Terminal 1. He shook it for a second, then unplugged it and drew one small drop from the delicate container. He held the drop on the tip of his finger, then he touched her forehead with the finger, owning the confidence of someone who'd been doing the act for quite some time.

A few moments later, they were out. A boy dressed in the airport's uniform was loading the rest of their luggage on a large black minivan. The largest suitcase had been taken from the plane's hold. The driver greeted them with a few polite words as they loaded into the back seat.

Owain had become a totally different person. More handsome than he had ever been. Medea gave him a pleased look.

- 1082 5th Avenue, please.
When the boy spoke, his voice was completely different from his previous one. One single drop, and everybody now would listen to everything he said, for hours on end, fighting back the urge to kiss him. Even the driver was mesmerized by his look. He said no more, driving the car into traffic with renewed energy. At last the streets of New York appeared, dressed in snow and their magic, parading right before their eyes.

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- What kind of man is the King?
Asked Owain, stretching out in a jacuzzi.

- The kind of man who would tear your heart out of the chest, leaving to regret not having another to offer him in return.
Medea was ironic, Owain hoped. But she wasn't smiling.

- If you say so…

- I do.
Medea wore nothing but a soft towel around her chest. It seemed to be one false move away from falling off, but never fell.

- Don't get me wrong. It's just his nature. I'm not saying there's merit to it. But that's just the way he is. It's not a skill he's learned, he was just born to be loved that much. Understand that I have known him for thousands and thousands of years, and I assure you, he's one of the few who has managed to undergo true, lasting change… And yet, that part of him will never change.

- Change? Has he improved after all these years?
Owain had shut all the windows, and even the skylight directly above. The room was barely lit. In that dim light, Medea's eyes found some relief from the constant buzzing of the neon lights.

Medea's breath clouded the small circular mirror she'd found in their new apartment's bathroom. She didn't remember choosing that place. It had to be Owain's doing, as usual. She watched her reflection fade and slowly appear again.
- Let's say that his status has certainly improved. As for the rest, I don't know. Taranis was a gust of dark wind, as handsome as a fleeting and ephemeral touch can be, but now he's totally different. He can barely be compared to any other thing in creation. Back in those days, his name was spoken in a different way, and never too loudly. It meant "lightning on a clear day," but it doesn't even get close to its real meaning…

- Until you changed it.

- OWAIN!
Medea's smile appeared in the mirror, then it faded again. It was a guilty smile, but it was also a warning.
- No, the first time he changed, it wasn't me. But yes, something did change within him, as it has since, again and again. Someone taught him the secret power of names, and he used it to change himself and his family.

Owain stirred in the tub. The water was clear now and his whole body was plainly visible.
- You never talk about your family. I always have this feeling, like you protect a small bundle of secrets just so you can pretend you have a thousand more…

Medea walked to the tub and sat on the edge.
- We are a little less special when all our secrets are revealed. Safety is defined by bounds, and we are always very careful about bounds. Don't forget that written texts, transpositions and lore already reveal more than anyone should ever know about us. You haven't been with me for that long, don't ask me more…

Owain's body looked like the trembling reflection of a boy. Thin, hairless and pale. Not what one would call manly by a long shot. And yet, Medea felt a certain degree of pleasure watching his naked shape. She was morbidly toying with him, to the point that, even though they were talking about the otherworldly nature of stories, he was visibly excited. It was quite a sight, as Owain's penis was his only trait which didn't need a potion. It was perfect as it was. Medea sweetly skipped her hand on the water's surface.

- You see, Stories can be divided into great dynasties and small minor families. I was born in the Bloodline of Myth, maybe the strongest bloodline of all. Taranis belongs to the Spoken Stories of the first men, one of the most ancient – and failing – bloodlines.
Medea made a cup with her hands and took some water, as if she was going to drink it. Owain held his breath.
- Later, he joined my family by becoming the Story of a Storm God. Mind you, nobody knows if the gods actually exist. We are stories, not gods, not even those of us who bear the names of those gods. This concept becomes clearer when a story comes from another great family. Such as the Songs, Fairy Tales, Sagas… or maybe even Allegories. There are so many ways to tell a Story and pass it on. Indeed, it's thanks to these myriad of methods that some of us have never grown old.

A knowing smile appeared on Owain's face.
Medea skipped her hand on the water's surface again, without getting wet this time.

- Is it night?
She asked naively.

- It's two o'clock in the afternoon.

- I'd like a drink. Let's get out.
- Ok.
He sighed watching her dripping hand.

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The awning cast a pleasant shade over the shop's window. Outside, the sun was unusually vivid for a city that had been veiled in snow during the winter solstice. Both Medea and Owain found that light disturbing as they ate an ice cream.
- Why is it that every time I long for a gin and tonic, we end up deciding on a dessert?

- Curious, isn't it? Still, that's us.
Owain answered. He was staring at the window as if a great secret was hidden among its carved candles, herb jars, and photographic books.
They were now in the East Village, on a side street connecting 1st Avenue to Tompkins Square Park. They had been walking non-stop, and this was already their second ice cream among the snow.

Medea took her sunglasses off and gazed into the shop's inner room.
- Is this place actually called **Enchantments**…*? I love it when humans hide things in plain sight.*
Medea leaned to take a closer look at the exhibited items.
- They sell ready-to-use spells and components, you see? This is not your usual shop selling crystals, trinkets and incense. There is good stuff in there. And it is hidden between a vegan restaurant, a stray cat shelter and a liquor store. Look! A **Magickal Apothecary***! They make customized spells and kits. Ahhh… what a wonder, these mortals!*

- They have twin black cats. One is called Eros, and the other bears your name.
Owain laughed out loud.
- I follow them on Instagram.

Medea gave him a surprised look, then she looked at the sign on the front door, where the Instagram profile was displayed. All of a sudden, she felt lost in the maze of Manhattan, with only Owain as her guide.
- Owain Patterson… we haven't come here by chance…

- No. It was a surprise. For you.
Owen shrugged, pretending to feel guilty.

- A surprise?

Medea raised an eyebrow. She was impatient, but she also felt flattered.
- Owain Patterson, I don't like being manipulated, not even when the final goal is to surprise me… Speak. What are we doing here?

Owain went to the window. A small cat came to him, mewing as if she could get some food from him through the glass. She was completely black and wore a silver pendant at her neck.

- Medea, meet Medea.
Owain chewed his cone's fragrant waffle. He always hated plastic cups.
- I have brought you here because I know something huge is about to happen. Here in Manhattan, according to the maps I've found left on the table in these last months. Not to mention, because I saw what you took from the lab, and the relics you've brought with you here.

Medea threw her ice cream away, half expecting to see the cup shatter against the street as if it were a crystal glass. But the cup clumsily bounced off the sidewalk and disappeared, swallowed up by a mound of snow.
- I DON'T like being spied on at all.
Now she was no longer flattered. Medea was angry. Something trembled in her dark eyes. Like the reflection of a bird that wasn't there.

- It's up to me to decide what you can or cannot know.

- I know. But I couldn't help it. I took a look here and there, when I was cleaning, when I put your notes in order, or when I was making a list of everything you asked me to do to reach Psath Beach. The rest is just assumption on my part. I didn't spy on you and I didn't snoop in your things. We left our home in Ios completely bare. There was not a single spark of magic left in the tavern. You took it all to Omer's Tomb and spent your last night of waning moon there. That must mean that what is going to happen here is…

- BE VERY CAREFUL.
Medea's voice cut through Owain's doubts like a blade. Her voice was suddenly vibrant, filled with impatience. A curl of hair snuck away from her shoulder, as if it were a black snake coiling before a strike.

The kitty pushed her paws against the glass door. Owain touched the glass against her paws. He took a deep breath, knowing what was to come next would not be easy.

- You are going to change a name.

Medea did not allow him to continue.

- Yes, Owain Patterson, I am going to change a name.
Owain did not dare turn around, but he knew that she was staring at him. He knew she was furious, but he felt more than that. He felt the sun disappearing behind a cloud, felt it all growing darker and more silent.

- I am going to change the name of something, just as I did with you, my young Sorcerer.
The silence was broken by the unmistakable thunder of waves crashing upon a rocky shore. Owain staggered and leaned on the glass door to avoid falling. He felt the ground under his feet slipping away as if a wave was eroding the sand. Medea's magic was flowing out of her freely now. The boy tried to resist.

Although he was a true sorcerer, he was only human. He would have to use all his strength. Medea was not like the other Stories. He could not hope to vanquish her. Her powers had come completely unbound.

- I did not mean to intrude. But I sensed that something was about to happen. And since I am familiar with onomathurgy… I…

- No, there is no 'I'. You are a THING, Owain Patterson.
Medea leaned on him. She was hissing now.

- Every time I repeat this name, remember that you once had a different name. I exert my will upon you now, as I did then. I changed you because I can. I will change EVERYTHING I need for the same reason. If I can do it, then I MUST do it. That's how things work with us Stories. There is no reward for those who deny their identities. Do you think someone would grant Fer Doirich a prize, or a place in heaven, if he stopped deceiving people? Do you think that one of your forgotten deities would give King Taranis what he wanted if he stopped tearing hearts out of the chests of Hags? No, Owain Patterson. It is only when we are ourselves that we are stronger, restored, and fulfilled.

Owain could hardly breathe. The hair on the back of his neck stood under Medea's breath.
- We think we are part of something. Part of an invisible world, a connected network of magic and power. Do you really want me to tell you what the King asked me to do? Do you really think you can do something for yourself or your kin? Do you think you can save them… FROM ME?

Owain stopped focusing on the kitty named Medea, took a few deep breaths, and slowly stood up. He had to do it. Maybe he would suffer the consequences, if necessary, but he had to try.

- No.
He slowly turned around.

He looked Medea the enchantress in her eyes, lowering every defense, almost trembling.
- I wish to offer you all the power within me, as a gift. Along with every spell, all the prayers, the prized items kept in this place. Every powder, every drop of wax, every concoction. If their powers can be used by men, then I can use them too. And I can turn this power to your will. I can be your connection to that power. And you… can use me.

Owain took something out of her pocket, a worn item in leather and steel. Then he knelt down in the snow, like a knight before a princess.

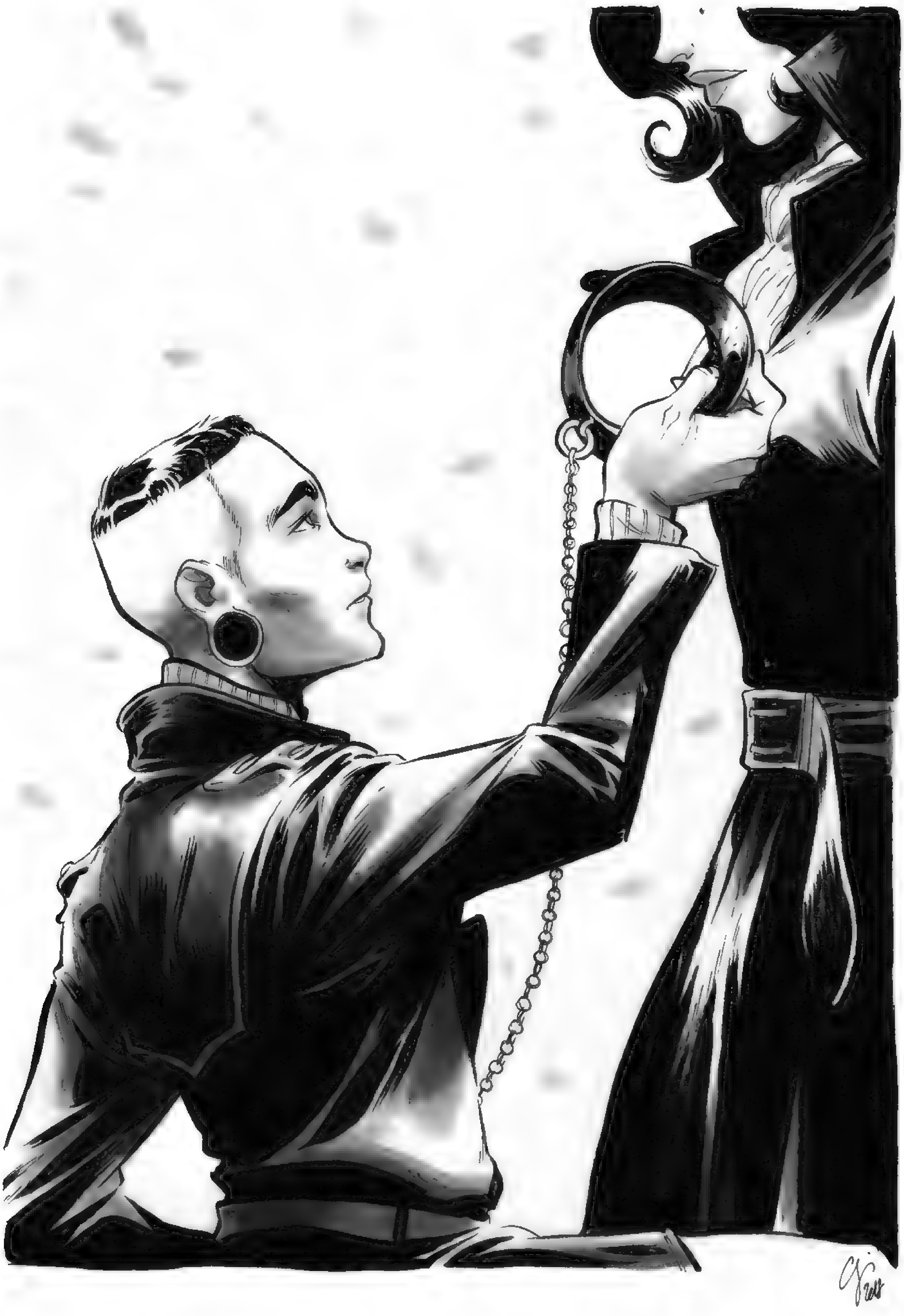
He raised his eyes to Medea in an act of submission, trembling with cold for the first time since his arrival in New York.

- *Because you are my mistress and I wish only to please you.*

He gave Medea a collar strung to a chain. It was large enough to be worn by a boy like him.

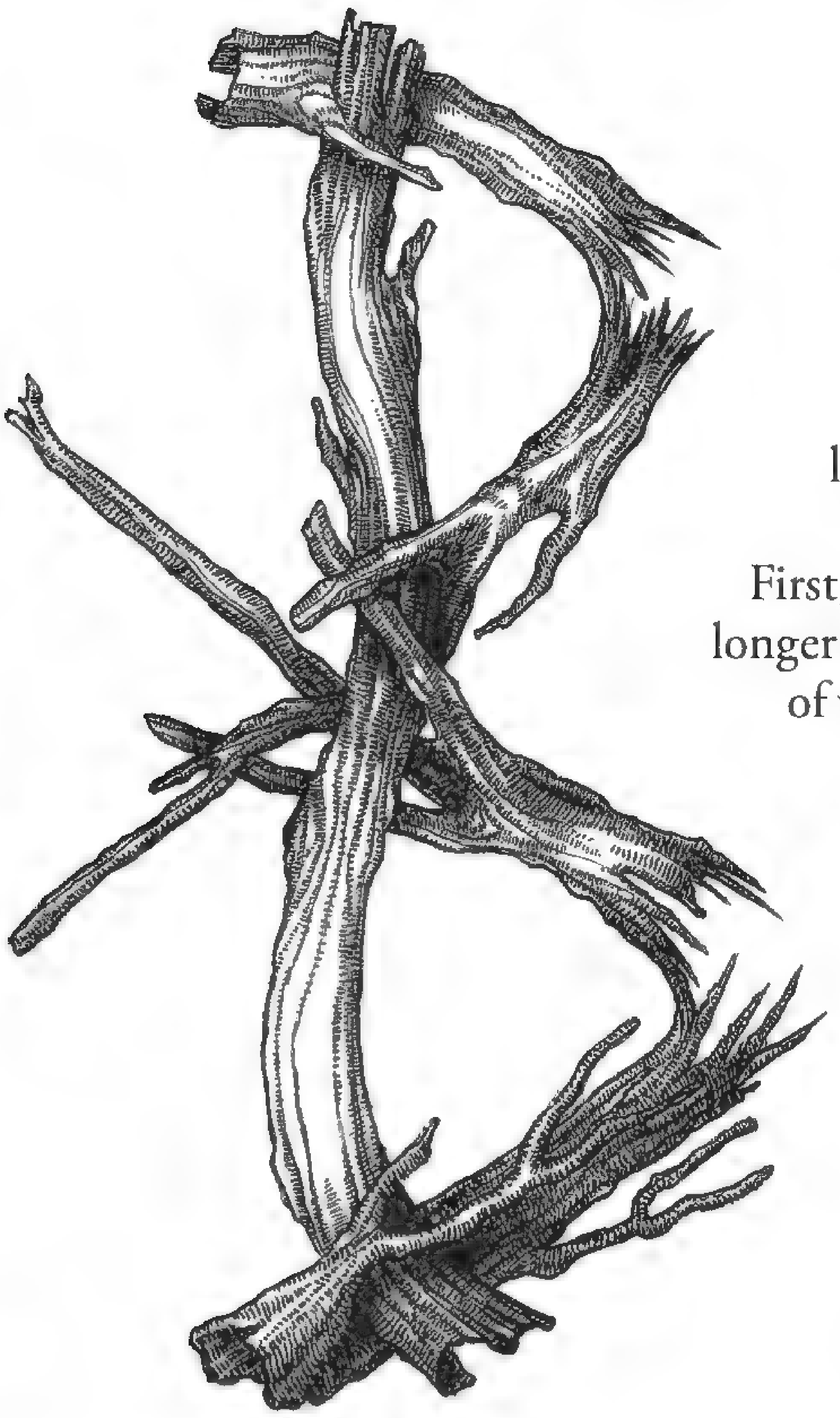
- *I may just be a thing, but I want to be your thing.*

A green flash of light shone for an instant in the shop window. It was fleeting, but Medea took it as a sign. She took the collar.



editor's note: the events of this short story take place during NOMEN OMEN #5.

TARANIS



"Come onto my heart, deaf and cruel soul, beloved Tiger, slothful monster..."

So the poet sang to the Faery King's ear.

Taranis was no longer the boy known to have danced across every court in Europe, that was a long time ago. He had changed.

First, his appearance was different: His body was no longer that of a light waif, vulnerable to the slightest gust of wind. In addition, he no longer had six wings, like the first men used to depict him with at the dawn of time. He was then an anthropomorphic figure with two wings on his head, two on his arms and two on the hips. Of late, only the smallest pair on his head remained, and they could no longer sustain him in the air: now he had to fly through magic alone. Once, he was the very embodiment of flight, the son of wind and darkness. Now he was just one of many who floated through the air thanks to a spell. A parlor trick.

Taranis looked at his reflection in the water, slowly washing his white and apparently harmless body. He had never cared about his lack of massive muscles or natural weapons. He had no claws, fangs or thorns. He exhaled no poison, he did not breathe fire, and he couldn't paralyze a foe with his touch. His body was conceived only to give and receive pleasure. In a dance, in an embrace, between sighs, caresses and frantic drumming.

As he gazed upon his reflection, Taranis knew his shape had always remained similar, but still, he could not recognize the child he had been centuries ago. Aside from his appearance and the lack of four wings, there were differences that ran much deeper. Thick veins ran under his pale skin and sunk into his flesh. Even his magic itself was vastly different from the spells he once wielded. His very essence had changed, and his scent was different as well. Once, his skin smelled of wine and honey, of sex and summer nights. Now he was forced to dress in perfumed clothes, hide scented herbs and flowers between the seams of his collar, sprinkle his skin and hair with verbena perfume and helichrysum oil. All this ritual, just to hide the dreadful truth that his body no longer had a scent at all.

- Your Majesty.

Taranis nodded without raising his head. Gazing upon his reflection on the water was like listening to a song, a tune that he didn't want to stop. He searched unsuccessfully for any sign of aging, but age could not touch him in any way.

The voice sought his attention once again.
- Medea has arrived in Manhattan. She thanks you for summoning her to the court and says she will join you as soon as possible, after she's rested from the journey.

Medea. He had summoned her. Taranis raised his head.

It was Zaltys, one of the weirdest creatures in his court. He had the features of a huge humanoid snake, but there was also a touch of a dragon in him. He was slightly taller than a human, his chest, arms and legs were athletic and muscular just like that of an Olympic athlete. His back was entirely covered in large black scales. The rest of his body was patterned in ocher, gray and gold streaks.

The sun snake, as he was also known, was a miraculous healer whose herbs, infusions, prayers and rituals could mend the wounds of every mundane or otherworldly creature…for the right price. However, Zaltys' mere presence was enough to heal the wounds of goblins and kobolds, which led them to worship him as a god. In addition, his judgment and advice at court were held in the same high esteem as his mystical arts.
- Majesty, I beg your pardon, did you hear me?

- Yes, Zaltys. Let our guest have whatever she asks for, without consulting me first. Grant her every comfort she requires.

Taranis kept his eyes fixed on his reflection. It was not just a matter of vanity: there was something wrong with him.
- Have my arms always been this long? They look different today. Almost disproportionate.

Zaltys' voice was deep and gentle. His answer was calm and steady.
- I don't think there is any disproportion in you, my Lord. Do you want me to examine you? I would be honored.

- No, never mind. Save your precious magic for what is about to come. We cannot afford another loss like Onchu's.

- Your Highness, as you well know, I did my best, but it was too late. There are arts far rarer than mine to raise the fallen. I will always do what I can, Your Majesty. Did you have a particular assignment in mind?

Taranis was now staring into space. They were in a dark cave, lit only by paper lanterns that floated near the limestone ceiling. The water was very clear, colorless and still, as only the surface of certain underground lakes can be. It was not part of the royal baths and there were no comforts around the pool. It was just a flooded cave like many others. Echoes of after-hours celebrations came from afar. Someone had been playing a violin for days, and now he was so drunk that he could only play very long and melancholic notes. The king exhaled a wave of magic, stirring ripples in the water. A rain of pearl-like drops emerged from the water. Zaltys watched in amazement as the drops floated up to the ceiling and then fell like a sudden summer downpour. Taranis kept his eyes closed. It was as if the cold water held him in a strong embrace. Then he let out a sigh.

- No Zaltys. You are my best healer, your place is at my subjects' side. The subjects I love. I don't care if they fear me, if they think they're better than me, or even if any of them are plotting behind my back. I will protect them all, from first to last, even those who are about to betray me. I will protect them from any looming threat, but not from the consequences of their actions. Everything will be fine in the end, and I need you to be ready to save them from their own hatred. To heal the

wounds they are about to suffer, to feed them when they will have to endure a bitter punishment. Use all the remedies of your land ...

Taranis was completely naked and he was dripping.
"Your land ..."
His voice faded as he glimpsed a vision of the Baltic coast. He began to remember.

* * *

The unprejudiced joy that came after year 1000 had only lasted a handful of centuries. Cold streets and frozen hearts had invaded the old continent shortly after. Slowly, but unavoidably, humanity had stopped believing in stories, and had fallen into *disenchantment.* Taranis could not quite remember how it had been possible to fall from the tales of ladies, dragons and knights in the first decades of the millennium to the wastelands devoid of magic of the following centuries. His mind was a whirlwind of memories, a ballroom around a drunken dancer. Sometimes a nameless face and a fleeting moment of joy, seemingly belonging to someone else, rose among his memories. Past loves, possibly. But everything kept spinning. The memories grew more and more frantic as years passed by, and everything except glimpses of the last fairy mansions grew cold and sad, became wizened and dangerous.

And as if all this were not enough, the war against witches had begun. It was them, the witches, that were the real culprits behind the fairy world crisis, Taranis was certain of that. Witches had always tried to subdue fairies, stories, or magical beasts. Before the age of disenchantment, when they were still strong and drunk with magic, this rarely happened. But as magic began to fade, witches exploited the vulnerability of Stories to subdue them. Finally, as their persecution came to its peak, the ladies of witchcraft retreated to the most inaccessible places in the material world. Thanks to their spiritual familiars, they were able to dig underground mansions deep in the heart of the mountains.

Or if they couldn't? They hid themselves in the heart of cursed forests, where their animal companions would protect them for years to come. In their isolation, they found safety. But there was a price to pay, and the fairies, the small people, and all the other Stories paid that price. The witches plundered their magic and their safe places, and sent many of them to their deaths. Many faerie courts were destroyed by men, but just as many were destroyed by witches.

The Stories that could leave the land of men fled to other worlds, the ones described in books and ballads, universes hidden halfway between imagination and dreams. Others locked themselves up in the most powerful courts, and others fled far from humanity. But many, too many of them, were instead hunted down or killed by those who wanted to burn their mistresses at the stake.

Year after year, the ballrooms grew more and more silent, as there were little or no reasons to celebrate. Soon, Taranis found himself traveling alone from one abandoned mansion to another, where he only found cups, tired musicians and dazed courtiers burdened by boring tasks. He became a grim and puzzled witness to the inexorable fall of his own people. Enchantment and wonder were rare things now, so rare that no one cast spells anymore, and everyone was writhing with hunger and weakness. Many courts then had lost all their splendor, becoming nothing more than cold lairs for wild creatures, grasping at the few sparks of magic still left in the stones or around a campfire.

It was near one of these lairs that, one day, Taranis met someone who would remind him of hope after centuries of sadness.

It was Midsummer Day, the day of the solstice. Taranis had traveled to the Baltics, following the rumors of their legendary rural celebrations. There, in the countryside, a shadow of the magic of the past lived again. Echoes of Nordic stories and mythologies had survived through means of folklore. It was late nineteenth century. Little did Taranis know that two world wars would soon be sparked.

On that night in late June, people had all left their towns and cities, pouring into the countryside, on the shores of lakes, at the edge of woods and pine forests. The doorstep of every house was protected by garlands of herbs and flowers, so that evil spirits could not enter. Each man, woman or child brought baskets full of warm bread, jars of herring, aged cheese, honey and spiced beer they had prepared just for that night. According to tradition, that was the night two legendary lovers were destined to meet again: Hamarik, the sunset, and Koit, the dawn. These two deities met once a year to hug each other on the shortest night of all. Those who lived here knew they had to keep watch, light fires, dance and enjoy the food and drink they had brought with them. No one had to sleep, not even children, because terrible curses took shape and scoured the land to seek out those who did not pay homage to the rural rites of the solstice. Some Stories took the form of hunters, eager to sniff out yawns and heavy eyelids.

Taranis had long been wearing a dwarven crystal that would make him appear like a simple human, a lithe young man like many others. After the sunset he had danced, drank and kissed many a girl with wheat-colored hair. He had undressed behind the bushes and then dressed again, with his body covered in sweat. Yet what he was looking for was a story. When a drunk woman by the fire began to tell the right story, he helped her get it right, ensuring she didn't miss a single word. At that point Taranis stole a loaf of bread, a piece of cheese, and a flask of beer. He left the bonfires, and swiftly left the human revelers. He scoured the woods, his eyes ready to swoop down on his prize.

Thanks to that woman's story, he searched carefully for the fern flower. It was an impossible flower that bloomed only in the night between the solstice and St. John's Day. He found it in a remote glade, lonely and shining like a small sun. He picked it up, made a wish, and then hurled it to the sky. The flower turned into a shooting star, that would point out where he would find that which he had asked for. Just like in the old woman's story.
"That flower can find everything, it's very rare, but it will always lead you towards whatever you're truly looking for..."

The raven boy flew to a secret island that the woman had called Osmussaar. It was a limestone rock devoid of high ground, covered only by a few shrubs and a small tree here and there. Taranis landed on the southern coast of the island, a windswept beach eroded by the sea. He immediately donned his crystal again, hoping to hide his wings from the humans. That was presuming that there were any humans on the island at all. Then, as he walked along the eastern beach, he came to an endless expanse of animal bones that the sea had pushed to shore, just as the legend said. Perhaps even the waves themselves knew the rumors about the lord of that place.

Taranis followed the bones and came to a ravine. There, he found a cave whose ceiling had collapsed, with a sinister tree standing at its center. The tree looked more like a carcass than some majestic plant. Lifeless bodies and items of every kind dangled from its branches. Animals, humans… they did not look much different from there. Under the tree, a man covered in rags rested among the roots. He looked dead as well. Taranis found the remains of a fire and lit it. Then he put down some bread, cheese and beer he had taken with him and offered to share them with the man.

The man stood up. He was tall, even when bent over. He sat down by the fire and ate his meal, pouring crumbs and beer all over his gray beard. Only after he had eaten did he seem to notice the boy.
- Get that stone off your neck. I have twelve masks and I'm not wearing a single one of them right now.

Taranis took off the pendant and his true form, always hidden behind an illusion, came to the surface. He tried to speak clearly, as it has been said that you shouldn't mince words with a man such as the one before him, and above all you should never lie.

- I have been looking for a wayfarer for a long time.

- And it took you so long to find one?

- I am looking for the wayfarer that can show me how to fix things. To restore everything as it was. Before men stopped believing.

- I don't know how to fix anything. And as for "before," I would simply tell you that time does not exist, and that you should try another wayfarer.

- I questioned the three weird sisters. The Daughters of Hecate dancing in circle around the cauldron. It was they who pointed me to you. And then, from history to history, and from omen to omen, I came to you. I even sacrificed the fern flower! I can't be wrong, you are the hermit I'm looking for. You must be.

- If that is true, then you don't know how to speak to me. I've only heard you croak since you arrived, little raven, and I haven't heard a real question yet.

Taranis bit his lip and remained silent for a long time, while the man finished his dinner. Finally, he made up his mind.
- How can I change history?

The hermit wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked old, but maybe he was just dirty.
- There. It wasn't that difficult, was it? Now, that's much better. Great question. Is there anything else to eat?

Taranis pulled out all that was left.
- I'll make it easy for you. You are your name, and your name is you. There is nothing more important. Each word that has been used to describe you defines your beginning and your end. What is not contained in your story is forbidden to you. What is sealed in your story is rightfully yours. In what I have just told you lies the escape route you are looking for. What kind of story are you, little raven?

Taranis did not hesitate.
- A tale of the first men.

- Do you belong to the caves?

- Yes.

The man nodded as if it were obvious.
- Then we have to hurry. You are a creature that belongs to the hunt, to the first rituals around the fire, the first music, to the first signs on the stone. Perhaps the story of a beast, or perhaps that

of a natural feature. You could be rainwater, a layer of dying embers, a fistful of slippery mud left to dry in the sun. In any case, if you are an early man's tale then you are too "simple" to change a story. You will be made of just a handful of words! Changing is too difficult for someone such as that. But I do understand you, you know... the future is not for you, after all. The good news is that you were smart enough to realize it. You could enjoy it while it lasts… or you could find someone to change you.

- But I don't want to change myself, I want to change the world!

The man laughed. He laughed heartily as the night sky around them grew darker with clouds.
- What is not contained in your story is not meant for you. So, we won't talk about it. You can't change the world. Not before you become the story of someone who can change the world. Is that clear? Right now, you are not this, the first men could never tell of something so elaborate. You are powerful, like all ancient entities. You are pure! Free, perhaps, because you are talking to me with the heart of someone who will never be a slave, not even of himself. Yet the idea of changing the world, a tale so filled with epic deeds and thundering consequences… does not belong to someone like you. But then again, why should you care? It's too late. You want to change a world that has already fallen into the abyss. We are all only waiting for the final crash.

The man looked at the clouded sky. A few raindrops were beginning to fall. But it felt like the whole sky might fall down hard upon earth anytime.

- But I…
Taranis was not able to say more.

Even what little the wayfarer had said was too difficult for him. He didn't know how to answer, he didn't know the right words to offer. After all, he was just a story told by some revelers around a bonfire. Sweet was every drink he poured from his hands, and his only real power was to enflame lust, pull the heartstrings, elicit men to crave more and more. He was the father of impossible aspirations, of explorations beyond borders, of fearless hearts.
- I… don't know what to do.

The old man lifted his hood, revealing only the shadow of his face, hidden in the darkness of the night.
- I know little ravens like you very well. You come from the Cosmic Tree. Some call you Banshee, or Fear Sidhe, unwitting bearers of omens. If you want, I can do something for your situation, quite exceptionally so. I can turn a few pages, rewrite your name ... but we'll have to do it a few chapters back. Changing yourself now would burn your whole essence in one blaze. A firework that is spent as soon as it is ignited. No, I have to go back. It is not easy and it will not be without sacrifices. And I will also ask you something in return. It may hurt more than you can stand. But you will certainly come out different. I can give you the concept of the world. Its vastness. I can make you look out over the chasm of destiny and accept the sacrifice of a few for the good of many. What does everyone call you?

- I have never cared too much about my name… Sometimes they call me Taran.

The man stopped and gazed upon the sky. There was a sudden thunder, a sound so loud that it seemed to keep rumbling forever.
- It's something, little lightning. Yes… I can change you, if you wish. You are a lightning who can tear darkness asunder… but I could turn you into a storm. A storm that could sweep the world away.

Taranis trembled in awe before that man and his voice. He knew that some singers could wield great magic, but he had never heard something like that.

Another thunderclap echoed in the distance. Darkness and wind were his parents. He hadn't felt them at his side for centuries. It began to rain. The night was engulfed by a fearsome storm. Taranis thought about his brothers, all of whom had been safely waiting for him for years in the Cosmic Tree, and who sometimes feared he would never return. "Sooner or later they'll get you too," they told him. They feared that a witch would enslave him. Didn't they say that witches often changed the names of the Stories to take hold of them? Was Taranis facing a sorcerer so powerful that would conquer and enslave him against his will? Was this the only way to escape his destiny, or was it just another devious trick?

- Well then, have you decided yet, little raven? Your time is up. Sacrifice a wing for every revelation I will grant you. So far, that makes three of them. Then grant me a fourth one, so that you will never again be in debt with the wayfarer you sought for so long.

Taranis gasped in disbelief under the rain, as if he were drowning. What would he be without his wings? What would remain of his story without them?

- I don't have all night! Do you want to gain the conscience of a god? To be worshiped as the Thunderer? The first drum of change? Answer me! Now, and forever, ANSWER ME!

* * *

Taranis opened his eyes. He instinctively looked upwards. A magic rumble coming from over his city unsettled him. Then, he felt something rising in the sky, a foreign power expanding over the entire horizon, like a backwards lightning bolt rising from the earth to the dark clouds. A frightening and beautiful magical force.

- Majesty…?

- Zaltys, summon my hunters, now. Something is about to happen in the skies above my kingdom. I want them standing watch at all our outposts. NOW.

* * *

From the outposts in Central Park you could see that the night sky had turned into something majestic. The king had never seen anything like it, not even in the skies of Northern Europe. A flight of small anthropomorphic crows fluttered playfully around him. Taranis dialed Devera's number on his smartphone display, which he used mostly to listen to music.

- My King.
She answered confidently.

- My dear, sweetest, Devera. Are you in the terminal room as I requested?

- Of course. I have just arrived, Sire. The specialists are informing me about the situation. It does not look good, Your Majesty. All mortal hearts are filled with doubts and fear, suspicions and theories ... some of them, although unconsciously, are leading our enemies to us. With such a show hanging over our heads, anything seems possible. Even for those such as us.

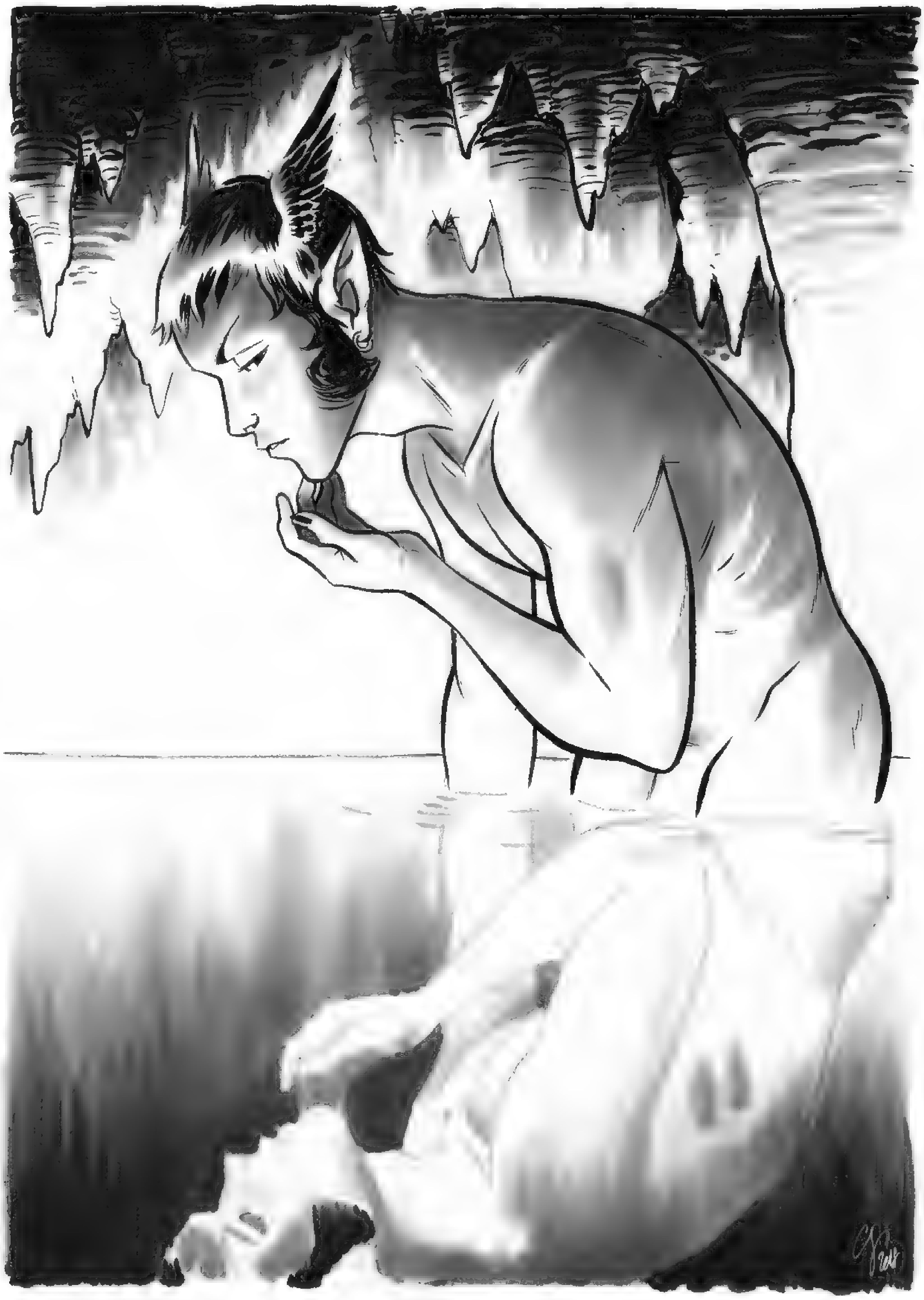
Taranis smiled, although there was no one in front of him to see it. The lights in the sky kept swirling faster and faster.
- My dear, we are several months ahead of schedule. We cannot allow anyone to find out now, at this late stage, what has remained hidden for centuries. Not yet.

- That will not happen, my King. I have already activated the emergency protocols. Our trolls are hard at work on chemtrails and other conspiracy theories: experimental weapons, ball lightning, UFOs, solar dogs and global warming. The gremlins are already sabotaging law enforcement communications and sponsoring fake news. We are also contacting corrupt influencers to counter the sightings and spread authoritative explanations and reassurances. In the meantime, I have recovered your Hunters, and they are catching up with you. I had allowed an exceptional ritual in honor of Onchu, on the lake.

- A ritual? I would have liked to be a part of that, Devera.
Taranis sat on the terrace wall, oblivious to cold and snow. The wind ruffled the black feathers on his short cape. After a long moment, he realized he had not devoted enough time to the giant-child who had passed away before arriving at court on Zaltys' table. Onchu was one of his favorites. He was reminded of this by a small boat still burning in the center of the JKO Reservoir. It was all that remained of a humble funeral pyre.

- Forgive me, Your Majesty. I considered it a very personal thing. But there is no doubt that I should have consulted you first. It won't happen again.

Taranis looked up, lost in his thoughts. The green coils wrapped around a central lighthouse. The source was near Greenwich Village.



The Fairy King answered Devera, but his words were not meant for her.

- Oh, ***Rebecca... I feel your magic. You have finally decided to save yourself.***

Taranis sighed and smiled again, without caring to be heard.

- I like girls like you. I'll just have to kill you enough times to have it stick... And that, I assure you... I am looking forward to.

THE NO-HERO'S JOURNEY

or *How finding myself locked-in actually enabled a better understanding of myself*

An afterword by Marco B. Bucci

Our first story arc ended with Becky finally opening her own personal Pandora's Box. This second story is all about the true meaning of Becky's "awakening."

I don't think a witch can draw on the power that distinguishes her, and choose to accept it within herself, without an initiatory journey. She needs to discover the relationships that bind her to people, elements of nature and spiritual presence. It is a family tree in which everything is contemplated and connected, beyond any difference. In the cognitive journey, the Witch looks for the right language to communicate with any other living being, learns to pay attention to everything that exists above and below her and reaches out towards the celestial bodies that watch over everything from afar. That's why, chapter after chapter of the novel, I told this dream that lasted a blink of an eye. A story that leads Becky to discover and confront her supernatural side.

This is something I explored in *The Fall,* a novel, or actually a collection of short stories, which was published in Italy in 2018. We managed to sneak a couple of those stories in the extras of this volume, but why not include it entirely in the comic?

Because this story does not investigate what it means to be a Witch but what Magic represents in the life of each of us, beyond our belief. It is a journey in acceptance and towards sharing. Here Becky, instead of bringing to light the source of individual power, encounters the "Beckies," her own reflections in other Stories. As if the source of power she can draw from was a light so strong that it needed a prism to be divided into many colors before going down to reality. Here opens one of my favorite themes of the whole story: every person, even the loneliest, is always connected to the whole. Becky first meets her inner coven and chooses her Witch tool. Not a wand, a scepter, a command stick or another symbol of her connection to nature, but her smartphone.

In Becky's own words:

> *"I choose a black mirror on which everything is reflected, and which shows me everything I want. A link between what is below and what is above. Access to the worlds that belong to me and that I know. The intermediary towards the mystery and all that is unknown to me."*

That's why my Becky goes up, in the alley, surrounded by her ancestors, reforged by her new power and brandishing her smartphone instead of a wand. That's why she has returned to reality bringing the sunrise over Manhattan and is ready to fight. Because she imagines impossible things and makes them real.

As her world has been turned upside-down (and trust me, that's just the beginning…) we witness the moment when our protagonist packs up and leaves her old life. Nobody will try to stop her or will miss her. Becky has been replaced and must abandon her affections and certainties, isolating herself from everything. **Her lockdown is about to begin. Is there an alternative?** The situation is critical: Patrick remains hostage to Taranis and Fer was taken prisoner. The stakes are increasingly high, and Becky must address threats differently this time. It cannot be based solely on the support of her ancestors or on the power that grows within her. It takes time to accept her new self, to heal from the traumas that feed her anger and finally to study the power, the magic.

I have felt similar emotions and needs very recently. When the Covid-19 emergency broke out in Italy in the first days of March, I was in Milan, at the epicenter of it, for work-related reasons. I spent three days with a friend of mine, an author of novels, co-writing an erotic/horror comic. We didn't realize what was going on outside the walls of his home. It all happened too fast. At the end of the weekend, I returned home, in Bologna's countryside. In the meantime, the world had changed: deserted streets, closed shops and clubs, fear inside and outside the houses.

In the following weeks we resisted, preserving what we could of our habits. It was at that moment that I felt Becky very close, despite the circumstances being different. I was experiencing a break in an absolute, safe, and comfortable everyday life. Something abrupt and violent that led me and my husband towards a future that we could not have foreseen. In which time, admittedly, slowed down its run. And this is where I discovered something interesting. One of the most complex meditation exercises that I practice slows down the body and calms the thoughts through a specific breathing routine. Usually, I would get there out of breath, dragging the frenzied pace of my workday behind me.

During lockdown, however, I slipped into meditation more easily and reached greater depths. When I realized this shift, I found Becky's path. She was not born to be a hero, but now she is ready to slow down for a moment, to understand the world that is changing around her. And even more, to understand how she will change the world itself. Is it possible that we too, with our rituals, or simply with our imagination, can do the same thing? **Can we take everything that is going on out there and turn it into a new form of magic?** The magic texts are not the only ones to deal with this topic, as much as the writer Ursula K. Le Guin herself has dedicated her series of most famous novels to this. Renaming means rewriting.

I don't want to anticipate what will happen, but in every story that talks about it, it is an act that is difficult to remedy. And there's definitely no remedy to what will come next.

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COVER
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Issue 8 Pride Variant by JACOPO CAMAGNI

Issue 6 Variant by FABIO MANCINI

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Issue 7 Variant by DAVID NAKAYAMA

Issue 8 Variant by MIRKO FAILONI

BIOS

Jacopo Camagni has been working in the comics and illustration industry for over twenty years. In 1998, he drew an original graphic novel dedicated to *Lupin the 3rd* under the supervision of the late Monkey Punch, creator of the character. Ten years later, he began working for Marvel Comics. Since then he's lent his art to some of the most famous characters of the Marvel Universe, such as Longshot, Hawkeye, Deadpool, Deadpool the Duck, the X-Men and Kanan from the *Star Wars* franchise.

Marco B. Bucci, born in 1981, represents a new breed of storyteller. Photographer, designer, illustrator and writer, in 2004 he founded Studio Dronio with Jacopo Camagni, with whom he created *Magna Veritas*, a comic book series published by Soleil in France in 2005. He also wrote the backstory of *Dogs of War*, a CMON Ltd boardgame, and co-created the tabletop RPG *Memento Mori*. In 2018 he co-wrote *Codex Gigas*, a *Memento Mori* companion book that serves as a full-fledged grimoire as well. Today, he juggles his work as a photographer for prestigious fashion labels with his artistic role in the production of role-playing game manuals, and with his work writing comics and novels.

THE KING OF MANHATTAN JUST MESSED WITH THE WRONG WITCH

Becky Kumar is a witch and a pretty powerful one, it seems. She unhinged the doors to a secret world of magic, a world that will force her to abandon her old life and embrace her legacy. After all, you may be born a witch, but there's no way you can properly use magic unless you study it. But as her newly found powers put her on a collision course with King Taranis, the occult sovereign of Manhattan, she'll discover there are more things in heavens and earth than she can dream of.

The second act of the urban-fantasy saga by writer and rpg-creator MARCO B. BUCCI (*Memento Mori, Norse Grimoire*) and artist JACOPO CAMAGNI (*Deadpool the Duck, Strikeforce*) pushes themes and characters towards developments both shocking and exciting.

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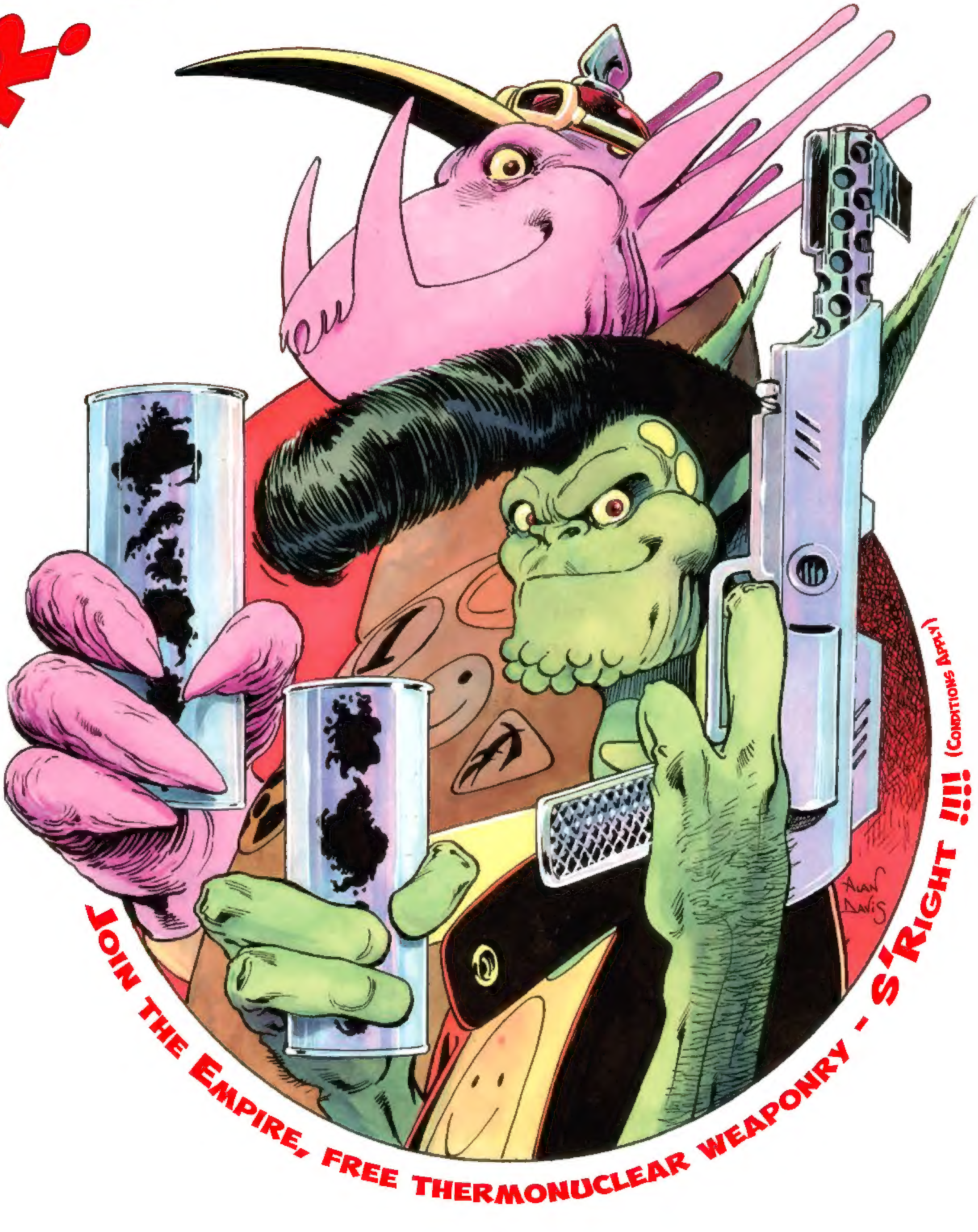
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